



EVALUATION OF THE CONTRIBUTION TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SDGs BY EU EXTERNAL ACTION IN THE PERIOD 2016-2021

Final report

December 2023

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



EVIDENCE
MATTERS

International
Partnerships

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by the EU External Action in the period 2016-2021

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ACRONYMS AND GLOSSARY

AAAA	Addis Ababa Action Agenda
AAP	Annual Action Plan
AD	Action Document
BS	Budget Support
Commission	European Commission
COP 21	2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference, held in Paris, France
CRIS	Common RELEX (External Relations) Information System
CS	Case study
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DG ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Hum. Aid Operations
DG INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
DG NEAR	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
EAMR	External Assistance Management Report
EEAS	European External Action Service
EFSD	European Fund for Sustainable Development
EIB	European Investment Bank
EIDHR	European Instrument for Democracy and Peace
ENI	European Neighbourhood Instrument
EQ	Evaluation Question
ET	Evaluation Team
EU	European Union
EUD	EU Delegation
EURF	EU Results Framework (predecessor to GERF)
EUVR	EU Voluntary Review
FPI	Foreign Policy Instrument

GAP	Gender Action Plan
GEPMS	Global Europe Performance Monitoring System
GERF	Global Europe Results Framework
HLPF	High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
IcSP	Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace
INFF	Integrated National Financing Framework
InFORM	Index for Risk Management
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession
JC	Judgment Criterion
JP	Joint programming
JPD	Joint programming document
JRC	Joint Research Centre
JRF	Joint Results Framework
JSRs	Joint Synthesis Reports
KII	Key Informant Interview
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MIP	Multi-Annual Indicative Programme
MS	Member States
NDICI	The Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
NDPs	National Development Plans
NIP	National Indicative Programme
NLP	Natural Language Processing
OCTs	Overseas Countries and Territories
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OPSYS	Operational System (European Commission information system for External Actions, currently in place)

PC	Partner Country
PCD	Policy Coherence for Development
QRM	Quality Review Meeting
ROM	Results-Oriented Monitoring
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solutions Network
SSC	Strategic Steering Committee
SSF	Single-Support Framework
SWD	Staff Working Document
TEIs	Team Europe Initiatives
ToR	Terms of Reference
TOSSD	Total Official Support for Sustainable Development
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
vdL	Ursula von der Leyen (president of the European Commission since 2019)
VNR	Voluntary National Review

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs) were established by the 2030 Agenda and adopted in 2015 at a special United Nations (UN) Summit. Building on learning from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs represent one of the world's only actionable frameworks shared by all UN Member States. Actively involved in SDG negotiations and striving to integrate them into external action and development policies, the European Union (EU) commissioned this global strategic evaluation to examine the breadth, depth, and consistency of their SDG contribution.

This evaluation focused on the period from 2016 to 2021 to examine the contributions above all made by the European Commission's Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) and the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). The evaluation questions were organised to assess the extent to which EU-established processes and tools have supported SDG contributions, the role of partnerships and coordination in enhancing SDGs, the mainstreaming of SDGs throughout EU practice and thinking, and the overall contribution of EU external actions to SDG achievement. The evaluation also sought to identify good practice and lessons to learn to inform EU external action and partners efforts in pursuit of SDG progress.

This process-oriented study went beyond a classic strategic evaluation of EU support; it had a strong quantitative, technical, and exploratory nature. The techniques included process and stakeholder analysis (leading to an SDG Theory of Change), Common RELEX Information System (CRIS) data marking analysis (which produced a classification model trained to fill early gaps in financial flow marking), mainstreaming analysis using natural language processing (resulting in an index), and regression analysis (to quantify the relationship between EU financial contributions to national level SDG reported results and related factors). Wide documentary review, interviews (global and for 27 sampled interventions across seven geographic case studies, and four thematic case studies) and a global survey of 87 EU staff perceptions were conducted. Thematic case studies included SDGs in the Humanitarian-Development Nexus, blended finance, the SDG-Mapper, and OECD reporting across various donors. Rigorous triangulation to validate and ensure the solidity of emerging findings was conducted.

Key Findings

EU Processes and Tools: To evaluate the EU contribution to SDGs, nine specific tools and processes were examined. They included the SDG Marker on financial flows, the Total Official Support for Sustainable Development (TOSSD), the SDG Mapper to assess integration of SDGs in policy, programming, and funding documents, the Global Europe Results Framework (GERF) to monitor and report on SDG progress, and internal templates for programme development. While large at the negotiations stage, the SDG team inside DG INTPA promoting these tools was gradually reduced to a handful of staff at least partially concentrated on SDGs.

Despite this relatively small team, EU processes and tools have proven useful to make SDGs visible across the institution and to provide a valuable model to donor partners for financial flow marking. The SDG Marker, in particular, has been widely implemented, marking nearly 100 percent of all EU interventions since its introduction. However, the integration of the SDGs in many of these tools is primarily retrospective, with little evidence to suggest that they have contributed to SDG achievement. The deep concentration of SDG engagement at the headquarters level, unveil a gap in awareness, guidance, and capacity development for the use of the tools at EU Delegation level.

Partnerships and Coordination: Wide EU partnerships and coordination mechanisms hold potential to enhance SDG contributions. The EU has collaborated with various stakeholders, including civil society organisations and partner countries, to support SDG implementation. However, while SDGs are used to frame coordination at a high level, dialogue at the operational level is not visibly centred

on SDGs. Opportunities may have been missed to leverage the SDG framework, such as in promoting SDG-based data for decision making among national governments and partners.

Mainstreaming of SDGs: The EU sets a high standard among global community partners, making meaningful efforts to mainstream SDGs throughout its practice and thinking. SDGs have been integrated across most processes, such as the Multi-annual Indicative Programme (MIP) template and the Global Europe Results Framework (GERF). While higher at design and early parts of implementation stage, resources or other elements were insufficient to sustain and expand guidance and capacity development notably at the operational level. SDGs mostly disappear at monitoring and reporting stages. This, combined to a relatively low degree of SDG mainstreaming in partnerships and coordination effort, led to varying levels of SDG integration.

Contribution to SDG Achievement: According to regression analyses and triangulation across all sources, EU external actions have made real, positive, and often significant contributions to SDG achievement. While EU processes and tools have supported SDG implementation, there is limited evidence to directly link these actions to SDG results. Overall, EU contribution to SDG achievement is driven by aid effectiveness principles, EU goals and the needs of assisted countries. An important limit to the identification of contribution to SDG achievement is the quality of the data available at the result reporting stage. Further analysis is required to determine the real impact of EU funding on SDG advancement. While the EU has allocated substantial funding intended to contribute to specific SDGs, interlinkages of them is less clear: more than half of all contracts referenced only a single SDG.

Conclusions

The EU has played a key champion role for SDGs, keeping them high on the agenda of the international community. EU tools and mainstreaming have made SDGs visible through much of the portfolio, with particular attention at the central policy level (i.e., headquarters). While not systematically feasible, SDGs do not explicitly nor directly inform the strategic choice and design of interventions. The potential to use the SDG framework to inform partnerships is not widely exploited. There is no clear overarching 'EU' position (beyond policy or strategic levels) on how to "do" --or do better--SDGs. Importantly, there is a growing risk of SDGs being forgotten or sidetracked, despite the positive recent contributions of the EU Voluntary Review (EUVR) and the SDG Summit (both of which happened after the evaluation period). While strong, many SDG-related tools fall short of their potential as they stand today and/or are not applied consistently enough to sustain EU contributions in a meaningful way.

Some lessons to learn include the need to guard against the inherent danger of mainstreaming (i.e., losing sight of the SDGs), the need to go beyond financial flows marked by SDGs (i.e., intentions are not results) and the challenges involved in a global movement directed from the headquarters level (i.e., the possibility of losing touch with the operational needs and actions). While there is a connection between results and SDGs for selected corporate indicators (EUFR, GERF), the monitoring and indicator system as a whole is not fully articulated with the SDGs.

Recommendations

While EU efforts to promote SDGs have been largely positive, there is still room for improvement. The evaluation points to opportunities to enhance strategies, organisational structures, and processes to better support SDG integration. It emphasizes the importance of more effective communication and awareness-raising about the SDGs, both within the EU and among its partners. Contingent on resources, the following **specific recommendations** are proposed:

R1: Continue to strengthen and develop tools to mainstream/advance the EU position on SDGs. Continued improvements in design, quality assurance, or harmonisation should, *inter alia*, strengthen harmonisation and quality assurance of the SDG Marking (including updates to the TOSSD to reflect main/significant contributions to SDGs) processes, develop a technique that verifies and guards against investment in one SDG that may harm another, further explore the promotion of interlinkages, and capitalise on the GEF to confirm intended SDG contributions. This can be also done by associating EU core indicators closely to SDGs, thereby filling a current gap.

R2: Increase EU influencing with development actors. EU Delegations should be supported to play a more active or explicit leadership role in promoting SDGs. The Global Gateway is an opportunity to align with relevant SDGs and with national priorities consistent with EU Voluntary Review (EUVR) orientations. A common EU vision across DGs with additional support to the United Nations may be required. Opportunities also exist for EU delegations to collaborate with donors and OECD more strategically, notably to promote national data sets.

R3: Establish a more detailed, updated, and downscaled position on how EU Delegations should or can 'do' SDGs better. This would involve 1.) clarifying more specifically EU aspirations for SDGs at operational level and 2.) disseminating a Theory of Change and a succinct operational guidance series as a bottom-up blueprint for all DGs, delegations and partners, through SDG integration in Global Gateway (GG) initiatives being prepared or implemented. In relation to human development, the EU could also seize the momentum of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus to establish and prioritise a set of SDGs that would inform specific collaboration across DGs.

Aligning to the above recommendations, the EU can further enhance its support for SDGs and contribute more meaningfully to their achievement on a global scale. This evaluation was conducted in parallel to the 2023 EU Voluntary Review (EUVR). The EUVR provides a comprehensive approach to delivering on the SDGs and focuses on policy, financial flows, and results frameworks. While beyond the scope of this evaluation, the roll-out of the Global Gateway, consistent with the EUVR approach, hold promise for enhanced SDG awareness and integration.

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Purpose and Scope

This strategic process-oriented evaluation aims to assess the extent of and describe the European Union (EU) contribution to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) through external action. It focuses on external aid provided by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) and Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). Above all, the assignment takes stock of the processes that are in place, establishes the lessons learned about the value of these processes and the positioning of the EU in a forward-looking exercise. More specifically, the purpose of this evaluation is two-dimensional:

- **Process:** To examine to what extent and how efficiently INTPA and DG NEAR managed to achieve the integration of the SDGs—across the respective system-wide structures and internal cultures. This includes designing, programming, monitoring, and reporting activities as well as producing interlinkages and synergies between SDGs. Another focus was the EU external mainstreaming of SDGs. The process review led to the identification of progress, lessons, and recommendations to enhance strategies, organisational structures, processes, and tools currently available to EU external action in pursuit of SDGs.
- **Results:** To assess to what extent the EU external actions implemented by DG INTPA and DG NEAR between 2016-2021 contributed to the achievement of the set of SDGs and what internal and external factors enhanced or hindered this contribution.

Based on the Terms of Reference (ToR) and the inception phase, the scope of the evaluation is summarised in Figure 1. The scope is broad and diverse. Accordingly, the methodology allowed the team to systematically cover the full set of actions and to propose well-defined case studies to produce actionable findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

The primary intended users of this evaluation are the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS), at HQ and within delegations. Other main intended users are EU Member States, stakeholders, and partner countries. The evaluation was completed in parallel to the 2023 EU Voluntary Review (EUVR)¹ on the implementation of Agenda 2030.

This evaluation was commissioned as part of DG INTPA’s Multiannual Work Programme for Strategic Evaluations 2019-2023 in association with DG NEAR. It is an independent evaluation conducted by ADE.

Figure 1. Evaluation scope

Temporal	2016-2021
Geographic	All 146 countries* under the mandate of DG INTPA and DG NEAR
Thematic	All sectors All modalities All implementation partners
Institutional	DG INTPA, DG NEAR, FPI**
<p>* DG INTPA: 49 in Africa, 41 in Asia (Central, ME/Gulf and Pacific) and 33 in LAC; DG NEAR: 7 IPA (Western Balkan and Turkey), 6 NEAR East and 10 NEAR South.</p> <p>** The inclusion of actions implemented under the mandate of other DGs and EU Commission services (e.g. DG ECHO and DG TRADE) are outside of the scope of the assignment. They will nonetheless be considered on the aggregate to verify coherence of the mainstreaming of SDGs in DG INTPA and DG NEAR.</p> <p>Source: ADE, based on ToR and the inception phase.</p>	

¹ The EUVR can be found here <https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/SDG-Report-WEB.pdf>. The EUVR was made public after the completion of the evaluation’s draft final report. The present final report hence includes references to the EUVR but the document was not reviewed in depth as part of the evaluation.

The report has the following structure:

- Section 2 summarizes the methodological approach and key features.
- Section 3 presents the answers to the Evaluation Questions.
- Section 4 proposes the conclusions and lessons learnt.
- Section 5 proposes the recommendations.

The report contains two additional volumes with the following annexes:

Volume 2:

- Annex 1: Terms of Reference
- Annex 2: Evaluation matrix
- Annex 3: Theory of Change
- Annex 4: Evidence at JC and indicator level
- Annex 5: Inventory methodological annex
- Annex 6: Review of tools
- Annex 7: Quantitative analysis of the inventory
- Annex 8: Classification model methodological annex
- Annex 9: Mainstreaming index methodological annex
- Annex 10: Mainstreaming index results
- Annex 11: Regression analysis methodological annex
- Annex 12: Regression analysis results
- Annex 13: Process and stakeholder analysis annex
- Annex 14: Global survey
- Annex 15: Bibliography and documents used in the mainstreaming index
- Annex 16: List of people interviewed

Volume 3:

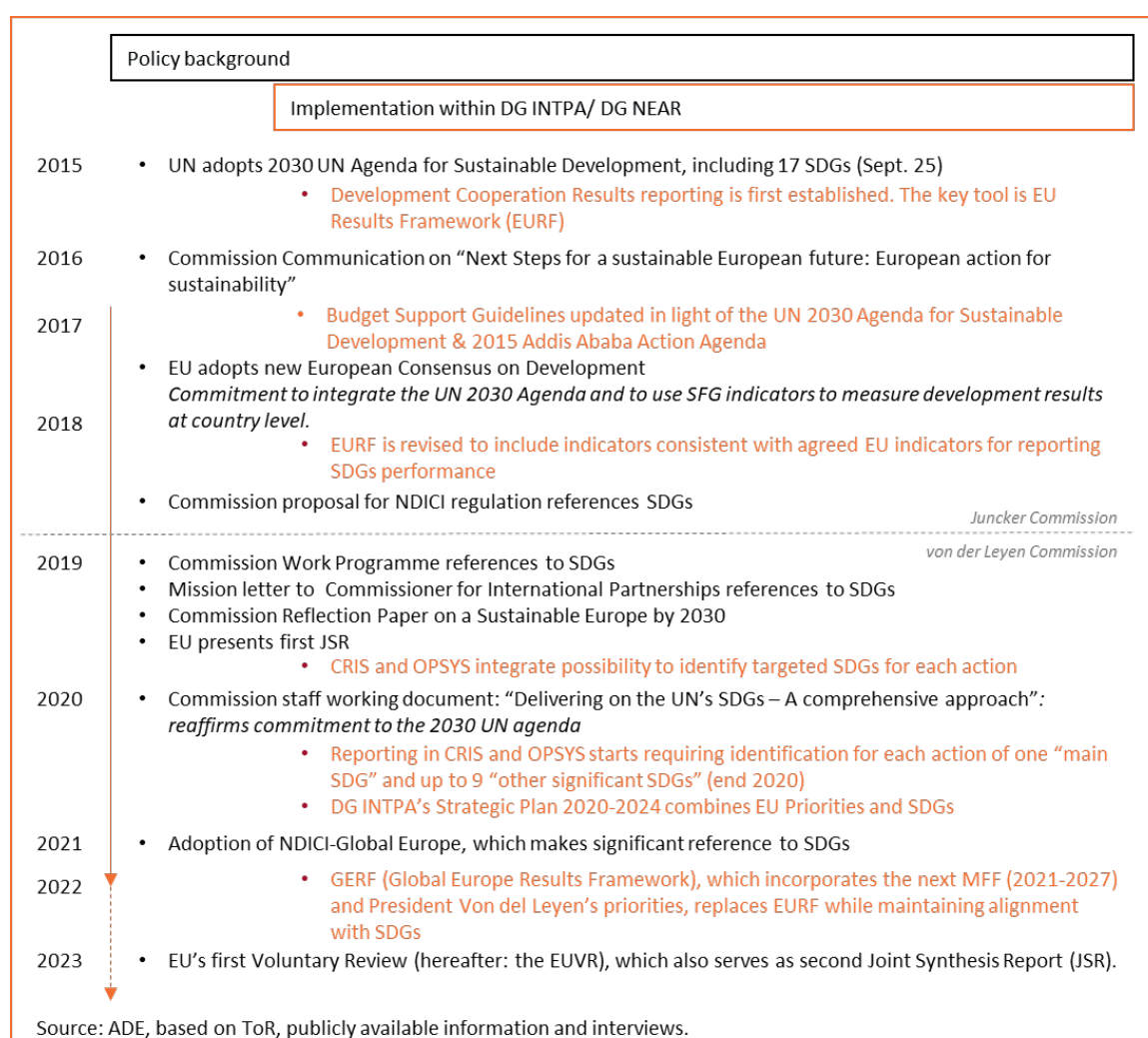
- Annex A: Armenia case study
- Annex B: Bangladesh case study
- Annex C: Colombia case study
- Annex D: Kyrgyzstan case study
- Annex E: Mali case study
- Annex F: Mozambique case study
- Annex G: Tunisia case study
- Annex H: Blended finance case study
- Annex I: Humanitarian-Development Nexus case study
- Annex J: OECD reporting case study
- Annex K: SDG Mapper case study

1.2 Key Background Information

The **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** saw the light in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted on 25 September 2015 at a special United Nations (UN) Summit in New York. The 2030 Agenda was developed to provide an actionable framework, shared by all UN members, to support Sustainable Development and measure its progress.

The 2030 Agenda defines three pillars of sustainability (social, economic, and environmental) and aims to achieve a prosperous and sustainable world by 2030. In addition, Agenda 2030 constitutes a universal call to action to end poverty, advocating to “leave no one behind”. The set of 17 SDGs, each with associated targets and indicators, build upon the lessons-learned and earlier achievements of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Figure 2. Timeline of key context and EU response



The EU and EU Member States (MS) individually have committed to integrate the 2030 Agenda in their development policy as stated in the New European Consensus on Development adopted in 2017. The Consensus also confirmed a commitment to Policy Coherence for Development (PCD), underlining the importance of an SDG perspective in promoting consistency between different areas of EU external action, between these areas and other EU policies, and between EU and MS action concerning development.

1.3 Overview of EU external action in the period 2016-2021

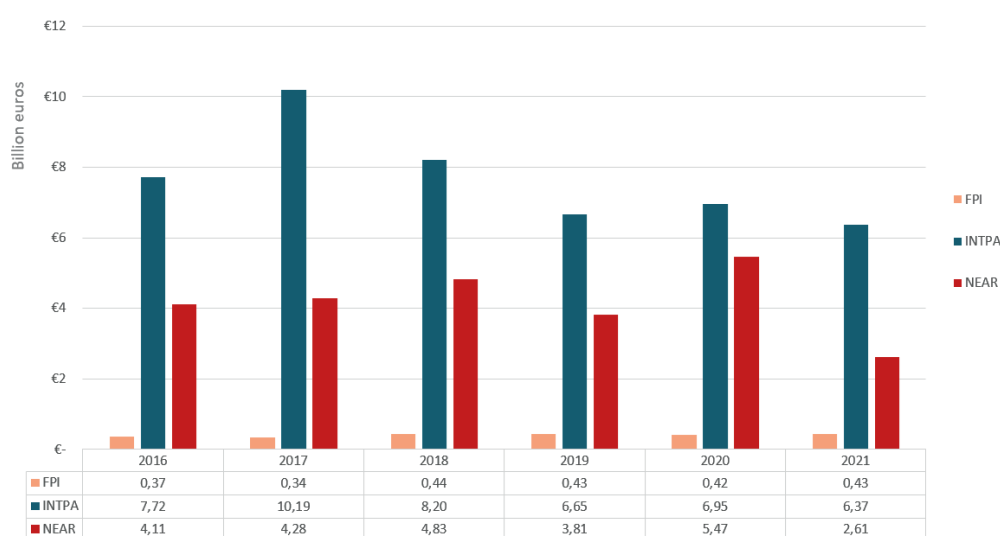
Because SDG contributions are anchored in the overall EU external action, it is fundamental to understand the scope of that action. Over the period 2016-2021, the total contract value (disregarding SDGs) of the EU external action was EUR 73.6 billion. DG INTPA reported the highest amounts, with a peak of over EUR 10 billion in 2017, stabilizing between EUR 6 and 7 billion from 2019 to 2021. DG NEAR contracted close to EUR 4 billion in 2016, 2017, and 2019, with highs of EUR 4.8 billion in 2018 and EUR 5.5 billion in 2020 before dropping to EUR 2.6 billion in 2021. FPI contract amounts fluctuated around EUR 400 million peaking at EUR 440 million in 2018. See Figure 3.

Most contract funds are channelled through public organisations². The share of amounts channelled through the UN and other multilateral organisations (except World Bank Group) have increased from 15% to 31% between 2016 and 2021. The NGO and civil society organisation shares have been stable over time (8-11%).

Of all regions (continents), Africa has received the highest share of EU contracted amounts, with a peak share of 52% in 2017 and a low of 39% in 2019 and 2020, before rebounding to 46% in 2021. Asia and continental Europe follow with shares between 17% and 25% and a slight decrease below 20% for both in 2021. Multi-country programs and core contributions to Trust Funds and International Organizations not attributed to a specific region and labelled as “developing countries, unspecified” have grown gradually from 3% in 2016 to 11% in 2021.

In terms of aid modality, EU external aid funds are mostly contracted as project-type interventions, their share growing from 60% of contracted amounts in 2016 to 76% in 2021. Conversely, the share of budget support operations decreased from 25% in 2016 (17% for sectoral budget support and 8% for general budget support) to a combined share between 14% and 18% from 2017 to 2020 before a larger drop in 2021 (7% - with 4% for sectoral budget support and 3% for general budget support). Blending operations increased their share from 4% in 2016 to 10% in 2021. The share of funding through other mechanisms³ decreased from 12% in 2016 to 7% in 2021.

Figure 3. Total amount (in billion euros) allocated per reporting DG, per year (2016-2021)



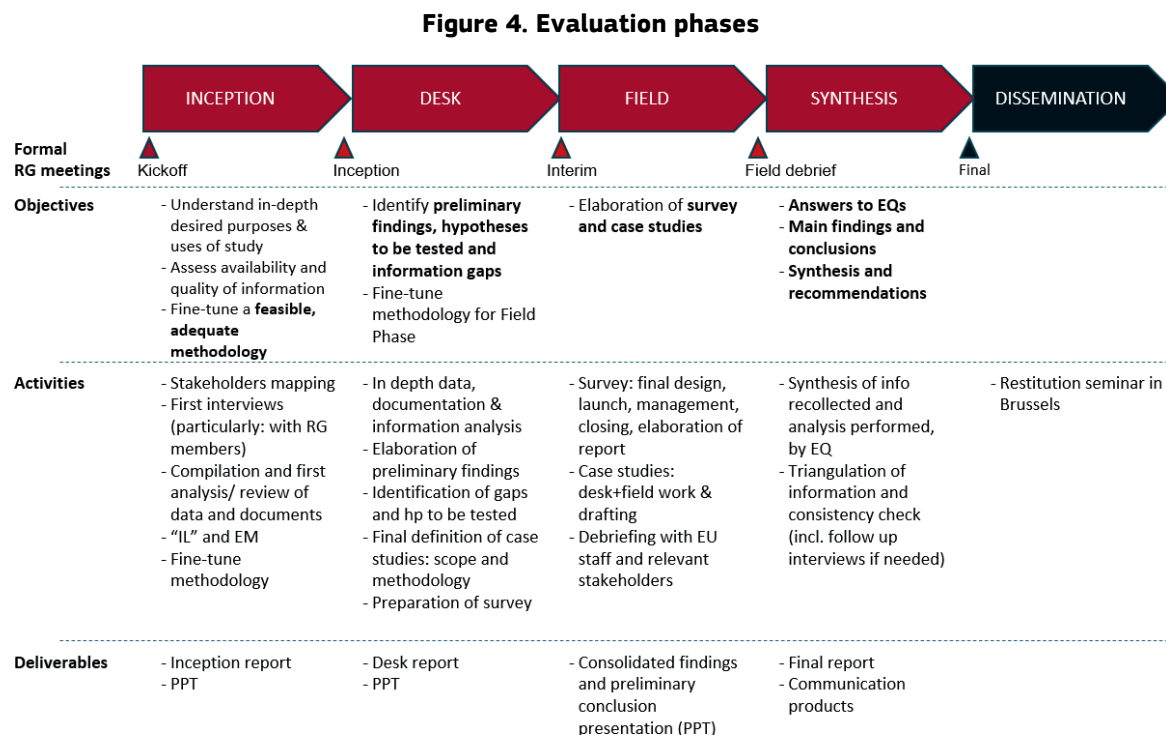
Source: ADE own computations based on the EU statistical dashboard.

² Public organisations cover governmental institutions within the donor, recipient, or third-party country.

³ These mechanisms cover contributions to basket funds, specific purpose funds managed by international organisations, core contributions to multilateral institutions, core support to NGOs research institutes, PPPs and other private institutions, Donor country personnel, other technical assistance and scholarship and training in donor country.

1.4 Overall Methodological Approach

This section outlines the approach and the instruments used in the evaluation process. Figure 4 summarizes the phases of the evaluation and the main activities carried out or remaining to be done.



Source: ADE, based on ToR and the inception phase.

This study was not a 'classic' strategic evaluation of EU support. It had a **strong quantitative, technical, and exploratory nature**. Given that the assignment encompassed actions at multiple levels (strategic, programme, project level), including multiple modalities, topics, regions and years, the evaluation team concluded that it was not possible to draw general conclusions only from reviewing documents from a selection of projects or programmes. The required sample size to arrive at conclusions would have been too large to implement within the scope of this study. We therefore developed a **methodology partially based on a systematic review of datasets and documents through statistical analysis and Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools**.

The team collected data and analysed them using a range of instruments and techniques listed below. The combination allowed gathering the necessary information at the level of indicators⁴ and made it possible to triangulate information from several sources to validate and ensure the solidity of the findings.

- **Process and Stakeholder Analysis:** To understand the role of SDGs in processes, we reviewed nine EU external action tools (designed to promote at least partially SDG) and identified the various stakeholders involved at each phase of DG NEAR and DG INTPA external action⁵.

⁴ See Annex 2 – Evaluation Matrix

⁵ See Annex 13 - Process and stakeholder analysis in Volume II for further detail.

- Common RELEX (External Relations) Information System (**CRIS**) **data SDG marking analysis**: The team analysed SDG reporting and its adoption over the period across various features (reporting DG, Funding Channel, Aid modality, Region, Country Income Type, Joint Programming)⁶ to enable a gap filling classification.
- **Classification model/SDG tagging**: To compensate for the low share of contracts that were marked with SDGs across the period of study (given the progressive introduction over the temporal scope of this evaluation), the team developed a classification model to tag unmarked activities with the appropriate SDGs.⁷
- **Mainstreaming analysis**: Through text mining and Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques, the team developed a mainstreaming index to assess the integration of the SDGs in a set of policy, programming, and funding documents.⁸
- **Regression analysis**: With the aim of estimating the relationship between the EU financial contributions to the SDG results in partner countries as well as factors contributing to SDG achievement, the team performed multiple regressions⁹.
- Documentary review and interviews for 27 interventions as part of **seven geographic case studies**.
- Documentary review, analysis, and interviews for **four thematic case studies**. These included the Humanitarian-Development Nexus, specific contributions of blended finance, on the SDG-Mapper developed by the Joint Research Centre (JRC) and on SDG reporting to OECD by various donors.
- A **global survey** of EU staff's perceptions (in Delegations as well as in Headquarters).
- **Interviews** with key stakeholders.

For better understanding, Box 1 defines some key terms and how they are understood and employed in this report.

Box 1. Lexicon for this study

SDG Markers or Marking refers to the assignment¹⁰ of specific interventions (by choosing one or multiple SDGs for reporting purposes in the CRIS system).

For purposes of clarity, while the TOSSD also marks budgets and corresponding interventions with specific SDGs, this is referred to with other terms (not 'Marking').

SDG Tagging refers to what the evaluation team did (i.e., using the classification model) to fill in the blanks of the SDG marking (cf. above).

SDG Contributions is a compound term representing the many ways the EU has supported SDGs. When not specified, use of the term 'contribution' includes both:

- SDG achievement/results/progress: reserved for those actions that aim to directly influence SDG goals/targets, results (generally) or progress towards them (i.e., the nationally reported indicator-based values). Hereafter, the terms achievement, results, and progress are limited to the goals.
- SDG support: represents actions focused on a lower level (e.g., using SDG language/framework and SDG reporting, making SDGs more visible, mainstreaming, integration, etc.) and not necessarily on actual results (achievement above).

⁶ Detailed findings are available in Annex 8 and detailed methodology in Annex 9 of Volume II of this report.

⁷ See Annex 8 – Classification model methodological annex in Volume II for further details.

⁸ See Annex 9 – Mainstreaming index methodological annex in Volume II for further details.

⁹ See Annex 11 – Regression analysis methodological annex in Volume II for further details.

¹⁰ The team deliberately avoids using the term 'targeting/target SDGs' because this assignment is not ex-ante and has no intention to influence the choice of SDGs that an intervention focuses on.

Evaluation Question #5 (EQ5) is focused on good practice and lessons learned. Instead of meriting its own chapter these are included in the chapters on EQ1 through EQ4, using the following definitions:

- **Good practice:** Since it is widely deemed impossible to identify *best* practice (i.e., ‘best’ does not exist at a generalised level), *good practise* is identified in a specific context. To this end, good practice is identified below in every EQ chapter as an action or process (or portion thereof) that has received favourable appreciation from numerous informants or levels in the promotion of SDGs. Additionally, the act of mainstreaming complicates the identification of “good practices” as its aim is seamless integration which makes some elements less easy to isolate.
- **Lessons to learn:** In contrast, any action or process that received less than favourable appreciation from numerous sources in the evaluation is listed as a lesson to learn. They are formulated to trigger thought for EU. The Evaluation team prefers to call these *lessons to learn* (i.e., not lessons learned) as the evaluation did not set out to establish whether they had been learned by those consulted.

One text box in each EQ chapter below draws from the overall evaluation and narrative to describe these two concepts (good practice and lessons to learn) in concise bullets.

1.5 Evaluation Questions

The Terms of Reference for this evaluation provided an indicative list of nine evaluation questions (ToR, p10). As part of the inception phase, after a review of secondary literature, an examination of many datasets and discussions with numerous key informants, the evaluation team formulated five Evaluation Questions listed below in Table 1. This set of five evaluation questions:

- **is built top down:** the first questions (EQ1 and EQ2) are concrete building blocks—providing evidence to be used in the more overarching questions (EQs 3 and 4);
- **is concise:** breaks the evaluation domains into **four key lines of inquiry:** contribution (EQ4), mainstreaming (EQ3), collaboration (EQ2) and more concretely, systems and tools (EQ1);
- **is cross-cutting:** EQ 5 is summative, looking across the four lines of inquiry to glean lessons to be learned at a higher level. Additionally, each question aims to focus evenly on DG INTPA and DG NEAR (the actual focus depended only on interest and availability of evidence). Given its cross-cutting nature and to ensure readability, the answers to EQ5 are interspersed across the other questions and sections of the report.
- **is comprehensive:** each of the original nine evaluation questions were reformulated directly at the EQ level or in a Judgement Criteria.
- **is manageable:** this simplified grouping (compared to a larger set of EQs) will make compiling and curating evidence for a complex scope focused on a dynamic theme more straightforward.

Table 1. Evaluation Questions

Evaluation Questions (EQs)	
EQ1: SYSTEMS & TOOLS: To what extent have EU processes and tools supported SDG contributions?	EQ5: How can good practice and lessons-to-be learned best support EU external action,
EQ2: COLLABORATION: To what extent have partnership and coordination enhanced SDG contributions?	

EQ3: MAINSTREAMING: To what extent have SDGs been mainstreamed throughout EU practice and thinking?	and in turn, partner countries in their pursuit of SDG progress?
EQ4: CONTRIBUTION: To what extent have EU (INTPA/NEAR) external actions ¹¹ contributed to SDG achievement ¹² ?	

1.6 Limitations and Risks

This is a summary of the key challenges faced during the evaluation and the mitigation measures that were implemented:

Table 2. Challenges, Risks, Limits

Challenges, Risks, Limits	Description	Performed Mitigation
EU data: Recent/ progressive implementation of SDGs-oriented reporting tools over the period	Reporting on SDGs has been progressively implemented over the period. Very limited codified information is available to show how projects relate to SDGs before 2019, and gaps also exist for 2019 and 2020.	Progression of the introduction of SDG reporting has been observed systematically as an indicator of SDG mainstreaming. Beyond this, a tagging exercise has corrected this issue. SDG reporting data, project descriptions, associated sectors and other markers have been used to develop a classification model that successfully assigned SDGs where they were not reported.
EU data: Lack of systematically organised data on actions' contribution to SDGs (achievement)	While we have received data portraying EURF Level 2 results for the years up to, roughly 2019 (for large projects only), more recent information appears to have been stored in OPSYS since recently, but the team does not have access to this database.	In order to have more complete and systematic results data over the geographical and time scope of this evaluation, the team chose to use the SDSN SDG index data as the main source of dependent variables representing SDG results.
EU data: SDG marking at goal level	The EU marking of SDGs is only conducted to date at the "goal" level. As of end of 2020, DG INTPA requires that an SDG marker be used to indicate one main SDG and up to nine further SDGs of relevance for each commitment and contract. The level of SDG marking and reporting influences how SDG achievement can be understood in the context of various actions. Because external actions are only tagged to the SDG goal level, it is not possible to use financial flow data to examine through which pathways (targets) they are achieved. This will limit the resolution of information the team can glean on SDG contribution. No donors, partner counties, or implementing partners are	Case studies in the field phase provided the opportunity to discuss the issue with key stakeholders involved in the marking process. Moreover, the OECD case study explored the approaches used by EU and MS to report on SDGs to the OECD. It produced a comparative assessment to inform recommendations for corrective action and convergence of reporting efforts.

¹¹ Unless specified, "**external actions**" systematically refer to both DG INTPA and DG NEAR programmes and projects as visible in commitments and contracts (in all geographies).

¹² **SDG achievement/progress or results** (a common thread and dependent variable) is hereby defined to be those reflected in UN country-level indicators sourced from either [UNDESA](#) and/or SDG Index data explorer and database by [SDSN](#).

Challenges, Risks, Limits	Description	Performed Mitigation
	known to report their respective external aid at the target or indicator level.	
UN SDG data: gaps	Gaps continue to exist in country reporting, particularly for specific indicators.	The evaluation team used the UN SDSN SDG index dataset to reduce the data gaps in the official UN data. This dataset builds on official UN statistics, and, where relevant, other sources of data from academia, NGOs, or other non-official statistics to provide a more complete dataset on SDGs and indicators for most countries. SDG index data is available for most countries with a population greater than 1 million. To verify the validity of the results using composite indicators as dependent variables, the evaluation team additionally considered alternative dependent variables for all SDGs ¹³ . These allowed to compare estimates and to ensure the robustness of the selected results. Yet, many countries had to be dropped from the sample due to lacking data. Therefore, the study is limited to the 168 countries that had enough data on the dependent, independent, and control variables. It is important to note that this creates a bias against poorer countries, especially small islands.
UN SDG data: timeliness	Limited ability to track trends and causality as some indicators used in SDSN SDG index use data from previous years when most recent data is not available.	The consistency of data used in the SDSN SDG index nevertheless provide a stable ground for our analysis. The data are available annually since 2016. To verify the validity of the results using composite indicators as dependent variables, the evaluation team additionally considered alternative dependent variables for all SDGs ¹⁴ . These enabled the comparison of estimates and ensured the robustness of results.
Wide scope: multiple DGs	The scope covers actions implemented under the mandates of both DG INTPA and DG NEAR, which have different priorities and operate following somewhat different processes and using different instruments.	Data compilation, collection and analysis have been structured to explicitly cover both DGs, using the same instruments whenever possible to ensure comparability but also making allowances whenever needed to identify and/or analyse differences.
Wide scope: all partner countries, support sectors, support instruments	The scope covers a very high number of actions, which range significantly in terms of support instruments used and countries and sectors covered. While daunting, this also offered opportunities to explore factors that systematically contribute to (or hinder) impact on SDGs.	Our methods have been tailored to the available information, to employ datasets, documentation, and other sources of information systematically – including through quantitative software, text mining and Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools. While not an evaluation of the EU's entire international cooperation and development,

¹³ See Annex 11 – Regression analysis methodological annex in Volume II for details.

¹⁴ See Annex 11 – Regression analysis methodological annex in Volume II for details.

Challenges, Risks, Limits	Description	Performed Mitigation
		our methods aim to clarify how EU actions and their reported results relate to the SDGs.
Wide scope: challenges specific to documental analysis	While NLP tools make it possible to optimize the time necessary to review a significant number of documents, the process is still very time consuming; Systematic document retrieval may prove complex and some tools such as the SDG mapper include a limit on document size.	The team was able to automatize a process to feed all the documents to the online SDG mapper tool to assess the frequency of specific SDGs per document and feed the mainstreaming indices.
Disruptive impact of COVID-19	The impact of COVID-19 has interrupted or reversed progress on SDGs globally. Results may need to be assessed in terms of how the situation was mitigated, rather than improved.	Time lags were explored generally and may need to further reflect COVID-19 constraints to development. Model 3 of the regression analysis accounts for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the relationship between SDG advancement and EU funding. Equation (3) includes COVID-19 as a control variable that represents the number of deaths per 100,000 inhabitants since the pandemic started. ¹⁵ The evaluation team has a thorough understanding of the response of the EU to COVID-19 in partner countries, including on how fund allocation was affected, through the COVID-response assessment.
Case studies: availability of delegations, individuals, and documents	The field phase relies on a series of geographic and thematic case studies that in turn rely on the will and availability of many key individuals in each pre-approved EU delegation. This is particularly true given that the discussions will revolve around design and monitoring processes – elements that rarely if ever are described in detail in project documents.	The evaluation team remained flexible and case studies initially foreseen in Morocco, Cambodia and Uganda had to be replaced by, respectively, Tunisia, Kyrgyzstan, and a thematic case study on the contribution of blended finance to the SDGs. Still, lack of access to relevant document and stakeholders, in part due to a lack of interest in the subject of the evaluation, impeded some of the case studies' expected contribution to the evaluation.

¹⁵ See Annex 11 – Regression analysis methodological annex in Volume II for details.

2 ANSWERS TO EVALUATION QUESTIONS

This section presents the main findings of this study. It is structured along the four main evaluation questions: EQ1 on EU systems & tools; EQ2 on EU collaboration and partnerships; EQ3 on mainstreaming throughout EU practice and thinking; and EQ4 on contribution to SDG achievement. Findings on EQ5 on good practices and lessons learned are interspersed across the other EQs (in boxes at the end of the answer to each EQ) and in the Lessons learned section in chapter 5.

EQ1 – EU processes and tools have lent very strong support to the SDGs, but cannot yet be linked to SDG achievement.

EQ 1: To what extent have EU processes and tools supported SDG contributions?

This question systematically examines a set of inventoried “tools” applied by the EU in their external action interventions aimed at contributing to the SDGs. In this evaluation we use “tool” to represent any system/effort/process or instrument that meets all the conditions below:

- Was set up or adapted by the EU explicitly to help promote the SDGs (as a single or main purpose);
- Was/is currently used inside an EU entity (even if also used outside);
- Is not a one-off element, but part of a live iterative dynamic system.

Summary answer:

- **EU processes and tools have lent very strong support to the SDGs, but cannot yet be linked to SDG achievement.** EU tools and related processes have helped to make the SDGs visible across the institution in a consolidated manner, one that exceeds most other institutions. Although already a strong model and consistently improving by learning from prior experience, EU tools and processes are still less than perfectly aligned to support their contribution to the SDGs.
- The EU has meaningfully integrated the SDGs across and through many tools and processes aiming to promote awareness. The evaluation team has identified and examined nine of those tools and has found them to be relevant with varying levels of influence.
- While SDGs may inform the design and selection of interventions by influencing national investment plans, the links between SDGs and design is not easy to identify. This is because SDG-related tools to date are generally retrospective, developed to classify actions and mark financial flows (intentions) at the end of the design phase.
- Marking SDGs has been critically useful to provide relevant tracking of EU volumes of funding linked to specific SDGs each year. It serves as a strong model for EU MS and other partners. While it supports accounting/reporting (i.e., serves as compliance), there is little evidence to date that the act of SDG-marking (which some may understand as mere box-ticking) or other tools also serve to support funding decisions or to improve SDG results.
- Awareness of SDGs is strong, promoted by, but also strong without support from the nine tools. Some tools are missing (i.e., resources not available to development them); others would benefit from additional attention. Many of the tools lack some relevance and influence partially due to less-than-ideal guidance and/or training. Some of the most important tools are too new to be able to assess the influence on contributing to the SDGs, e.g., Tool 4/TOSSD and Tool 9/GERF.

Tools do not exist outside of human resources mandated to design and implement them. **Human resources for SDG support in the Commission have evolved across the years and today**

remain limited. In 2016, a team of five staff in the former DEVCO.A1 were working nearly fulltime on SDGs. When merged with the Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) team, this became seven staff. Starting in the later part of 2020, delegated manpower gradually decreased as other priorities surfaced, including the restructuring of DG INTPA (e.g., NDICI programming, Team Europe, Global Gateway). This change created a new position: Advisor to the Director-General focused on SDGs and inequality. Today, the INTPA.D2 team (situated within a wider unit responsible for UN, G7/G20 and bilateral relationships inter alia) includes at most four staff--none of them working 100 percent on SDGs. The SDG team has been supported intermittently by transitional human resources (i.e., during the EU Voluntary Review) and collaborates closely with INTPA Unit R2 on Reporting, D1 on Team Europe & Global Gateway and D4 on Results & Evaluation and JRC.

A total of nine tools (see definition above) **have been designed or adapted to explicitly support the SDGs.** Tools that support SDG mainstreaming across EU practice were inventoried (see Table 3). The inventory includes nine tools¹⁶ covering various phases, objectives, and users. The nine include templates¹⁷ (Tools 1 and 2), SDG Marker (Tool 3 reported in the Action Documents (AD) and recorded in the EU Dashboard/CRIS), the TOSSD (Tool 4) and SDG Mapper (Tool 5), as well as other tools and systems that support incorporation of SDGs in monitoring (such as Tool 6: Yearly Progress Reports and Tool 7: Quality review Meeting) and reporting on SDG advances, such as Annual DG Reports (Tool 8) and Global Europe Results Framework (GERF, formally EURF, Tool 9). Some of the tools are explicitly referred to in the SDG Contribution Theory of Change, and a more detailed list is found in Table 3 below.

Table 3. SDG tools across the EU intervention cycle

EU phase: Design (identification, formulation)	EU phase: Implementation	EU phase: Evaluation/audit
DESIGN	MONITORING	RESULTS
5 tools	2 tools	2 tools
1. Multi-annual Indicative Programme (MIP) template 2. Annual Action Plans (AAP) template 3. Action Document (AD) template and “SDG Marker” (in CRIS) 4. Total Official Support for Sustainable Development (TOSSD) 5. SDG Mapper (JRC)	6. Yearly Progress Reports (YPR, formerly EAMR) 7. Strategic Steering Committee (SSC)/Quality Review Meeting (QRM) updates	8. Annual reports on the implementation of the European Union’s external action instruments (Annual DG Reports) 9. Global Europe Results Framework (GERF) and previous EURF ¹⁸

Source: ADE

Tools that are currently excluded from the above inventory are the Results Oriented Monitoring (ROM) reports because no explicit mention of SDGs was found in the templates, and external reporting elements i.e., OECD resource reporting and UN SDG results reporting. Budget support manual marking, as a separate tool, is also not currently included: the evaluation team has reviewed

¹⁶ There is no internal consensus around the term ‘tool’. For example, DG NEAR suggests that “SDGs cannot be used as – or to inform – a tool: they are not an internal framework used to address our interventions”. Instead, they are “more a matter of purpose and outcome”. While only a single voice, this represents a visible perspective across parts of the EU.

¹⁷ It is noteworthy that Team Europe initiatives do not benefit from templates (contrary to MIPs, AD, AAP).

¹⁸ For DG NEAR only, see also IPA III Result Framework (SWD (2022); 445 final).

evidence from the Budget Support Database and found that SDGs marked therein only partially align with the SDGs marked in the CRIS dataset.

To examine the tools, the evaluation team compiled various resources. Both templates and many examples of Tools 1 and 2 (MIP, AAP) were examined. An important component of the evaluation desk phase was invested on Tool 3, the SDG Marker (see Annex 8 for details of a tagging exercise that aimed to fill in the blanks of interventions missing SDG markings). The SDG Mapper (Tool 4) was applied directly to produce the Mainstreaming Index (See Annex 9) as well as the Case Study on the nexus (Annex A). Tool 4, TOSSD, was reviewed via documents and a set of interviews. For Tool 6, Yearly Progress Report data were received and examined for four years (2018 to 2021). For Tool 7, reports from five of the case study countries were shared for review. Annual reports (Tool 8) from three DGs were reviewed and coded. While the guidance for Tool 9/GERF (and previously EURF) has been used and the data set received, this tool is still too premature to be rigorously evaluated (but was retained as a tool given its importance).

Familiarity of the nine tools by the EU and partners varies widely. The best known of the nine are the AD Template/SDG Marker (Tool 3), the AAP (Tool 2) and the Yearly Progress Report (Tool 6). The least known of the tools are the TOSSD (Tool 4), the SDG Mapper (Tool 5) and Annual DG Reports¹⁹ (Tool 8). See Table 4 further below.

EU has meaningfully integrated the SDGs across and through many tools and processes.

Overall, the EU is widely recognised as having meaningfully integrated the SDGs across many tools and processes. The strongest integration is seen in the MIP template (Tool 1) and the GERF (Tool 9) which are well known by EU staff. In the perception of those consulted, the integration is less smooth and likely less meaningful for the SSC/QRM (Tool 7) and the Yearly Progress Reports (YPR, Tool 6). The familiarity with the GERF (Tool 9) is growing, but it is still too new for this evaluation to assess its influence on meaningful SDG integration.

Despite the above, there is no comprehensive EU blueprint for SDG integration in external action. The 2020 Staff Working Document (SWD) “Delivering on the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals – A comprehensive approach”²⁰ describes a whole-of-government approach with a tight focus on policy, financial flows, and results framework mainly at the EU headquarter level. It does not, however, suggest what Heads of EU Delegations or Programme Managers at country level should or could do to help promote SDGs, at various stages of an intervention. It also does not convey how reporting on SDGs can be used for future decision making.

SDG-related tools are mainly retrospective (ex-post) and anchored at the design stage.

Most SDG tools were developed to classify the design phase, or to mark financial flows (i.e., to establish intentions). As seen in Table 3 above, five of the nine tools are employed in the design phase versus two each for the monitoring and reporting phases. It may indeed be very useful to register SDG-related intentions (financial or thematic). To wit, some respondents suggest that marking improves accountability given the hope that “what gets measured, gets done”²¹. For many, however, this action and the resulting trends seem to directly convey the idea that the SDGs were used deliberately to inform the design of interventions. This was not the case. Instead, all tools except the SDG Mapper (Tool 5) are principally retrospective – to classify or tally the intentions *ex post*.

One tool in the monitoring phase, the SSC/QRM (Tool 7) is a process whereby a senior steering committee provides strategic oversight on proposed interventions, with an opportunity to influence the role/balance of SDGs. While this was not visible in the small set of SSC/QRM minutes reviewed

¹⁹ The Annual DG Reports are perhaps well known, but not as a tool to promote SDG awareness or mainstreaming, etc.

²⁰ EU, 2020. [Staff Working Document](#).

²¹ MN 311

and in the individual country fiches following the committee meetings, the meetings appear to check that the various entries in AD templates are adequately addressed. While they would be expected to flag an identified gap in SDG identification, such an explicit case was not confirmed²². The SDG mapper could be used to fill gaps here.

Marking SDGs in financial flows (in Tools 3 and 4) provides important compliance and box-checking accountability. Without a doubt, the EU is a leader in marking SDGs. Of course, it is valuable to check (here, SDG Marking) that investments are appropriately balanced. However, there is no evidence that anyone is systematically playing this role (i.e., verifying the SDG coverage, etc.).

Additionally, while there is yet no reliable technique to confirm that an investment in SDG 'X' leads to stronger national results for SDG 'X', the GERF (Tool 9) may enable this type of analysis. The GERF organizes indicators across three levels with Level 2 most directly reflecting SDGs in development outcomes and outputs at country level.

As expressed in the 2019 Yearly Progress Reports (formerly EAMR, Tool 6), “most new AAPs are clearly linked to specific SDGs” but “SDG goals and targets appear in some cases to be attributed to initiatives ex-post and in a more traditional, sectoral manner, while best practice examples adopt the SDGs as the background for the context analyses and dialogues...” (YPR, 2019).

The AD/SDG marker (Tool 3) is the most well-known and among the reportedly most fully integrated of the set of nine tools (see Figure 5, Source: ADE based on 87 EU survey respondents). Its coverage has increased since its introduction to now include (or mark) nearly 100 per cent of all interventions. However, as stated above, evidence wavers about how meaningful SDG marking is (given there is no clear guidance).²³

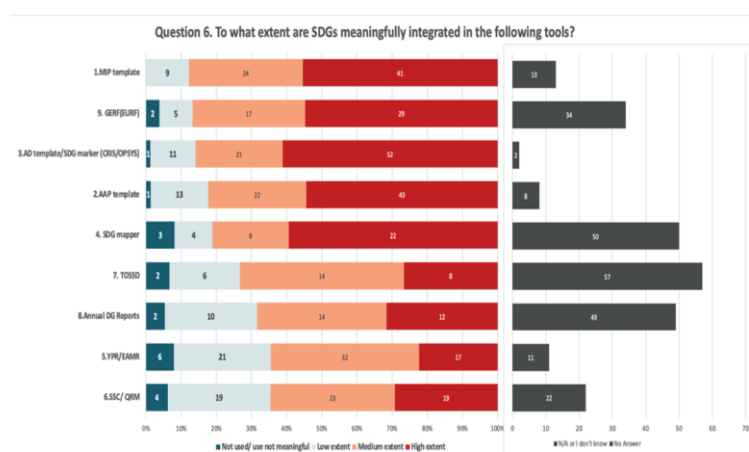
Regardless, tracking financial flows across the SDGs is seen as an important first step and reportedly provides a strong model to be replicated by the OECD, other donors, and Member States.

Awareness of SDGs is strong--even without support from the 9 tools.

The tools promoted by the EU have clearly helped widen the SDG awareness and visibility.

The SDGs are seen to be gradually more influential for tool users than for the end recipients. SDG visibility is perceived (by EU personnel) to be greatest for EU institutions / personnel and implementing partners and lowest for aid recipients and EU Member States (See Figure 6, Source: Survey). As noted above, the GERF (Tool 9) holds promise to enhance SDG awareness even further. The Yearly Progress Report (Tool 6), however, has been discontinued.

Figure 5. Meaningful integration of SDGs in tools



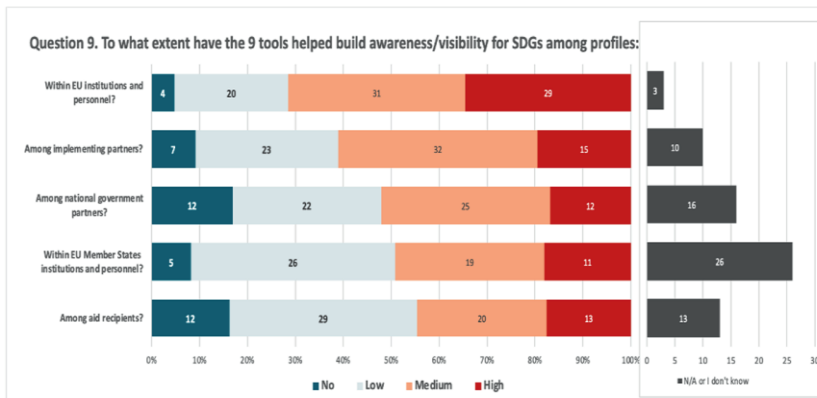
Source: ADE base on 87 survey respondents.

²² Sources: SSC documents and EU email exchanges

²³ Although, in general terms, there is guidance for SDG reporting produced for all donors, notably the OECD Handbook on SDG reporting

Many of the INTPA tools appear to be used widely across countries and years. E.g., there is evidence of SDG marking (Tool 3) prior to this evaluation, increasing since 2016 when it was introduced and covering virtually all contracts since 2019. Use of the tools is less evident for DG NEAR, which only completes some sections of the YPR and that have result frameworks that differ somewhat from DG INTPA (e.g., gender and IPA).

Figure 6. Profiles most supported and SDG-aware



Source: ADE survey

Wider SDG awareness and visibility is interpreted here to mean beyond the EU staff or individuals directly applying the SDG tool. There are a few tools available publicly online, such as the SDG Mapper (Tool 5), many are mainly directed to a European MS audience. Communication on SDGs to the public (generally and what the Commission does) is considered weak by some informants. The “Commission is not very strong on communicating what we do” and “the general public is not well informed about SDGs”, despite having recently reshaped the DG INTPA communication unit²⁴.

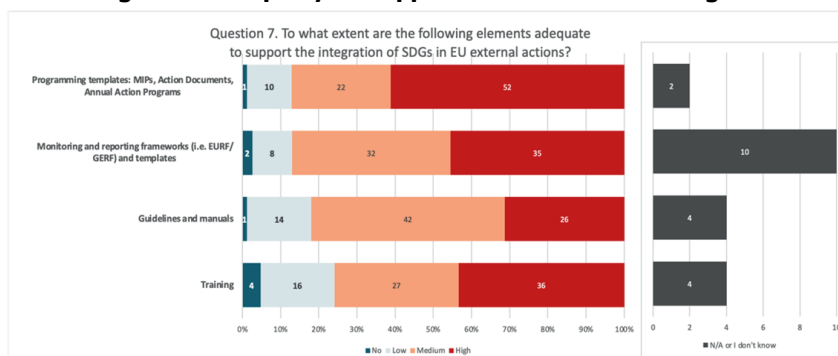
Awareness about the SDGs is also strong across the European Commission without support from EU-promoted tools. Examples of this were reported in the two case studies focused on Mali and on DG ECHO. With few to none of the nine tools reportedly known to be used in those cases, SDGs have still been promoted, in parallel also through the donor approaches and interventions. See details on both cases in Annex.

While templates (Tools 2 and 3) are understood to serve as compliance mechanisms to remind EU staff and require them to explicitly refer to SDGs as part of the design, no incentives or feedback (ex-template) have been found on how to complete the SDG section correctly. Nonetheless the SDG Mapper (Tool 5), while less well known and less widely used, was precisely for this reason conceived to help managers think through the gaps and links, and to replace the need for additional written guidance.

Support for SDG integration is reportedly high (see Figure 7). Those consulted deem the adequacy of the support to be good, especially concerning the reflection of the SDGs in the templates.

The instructions found in templates and official documents stress that SDGs and interlinkages should be considered for defining priorities and designing actions. However, the same instructions do not intend to motivate the use of SDGs to inform the design of interventions. To date,

Figure 7. Adequacy of support related to SDG integration



Source: ADE survey

²⁴ Source: MN 310

discussions on intervention priorities at the level of each country are seen to be rooted in national priorities and jointly assessed needs, with no explicit regard for SDG achievement. Guidelines and manuals for use of the other tools were less widely appreciated. Informants who preferred greater support suggested needs for better instruction in their use (i.e., clear, concise, examples, user-friendliness while assuring simplicity) and additional training. Guidance and capacity development related to referencing/using SDGs beyond templates is one aspect included in training related to Joint Programming. Some respondents suggest that the level of capacity and resources at DG INTPA can explain most weaknesses with guidance and oversight.

Some tools are missing; others would benefit from additional attention.

An important tool (or part of the existing process) **related to the SDGs is missing.** Guidance suggests that a focus on one SDG should not harm any other SDG²⁵. The text includes a somewhat tentative implicit check (i.e., "statistical reporters could agree that simply by reporting the SDG focus of an activity they declare that the activity does not have substantial, unmitigated, detrimental effect to one or more SDGs..."; p16). There is, however, no element that requires this to be checked and or noted anywhere while marking SDGs (this holds also for TOSSD). One could argue that development effectiveness principles (e.g., Busan) somehow guarantee most of the safeguards required (and especially those becoming more common for the cross-cutting aspects of gender and environment). But consciousness is consolidating anew across many domains that doing unintentional harm remains an inherent risk for all development programming and should not be assumed.

Disconnects among tool processes are frequent. For example, between political discussions about priorities, or between operation managers who complete the templates and agents who key in the SDG Markers per intervention. Another disconnect is between budget support manual marking and financial marking. As a touted model and the most known and integrated tool, the SDG Marker merits attention to address the challenges summarised in Box 2. The SDG marking process (Tool 3) reportedly benefits from little guidance and no quality assurance.

²⁵ OECD, 2022. DAC working Party on Development Finance Statistics. Draft Handbook for reporting the SDG focus on development cooperation activities. DCD/DAC/D.

Box 2. Financial Marker Challenges

Inconsistent stories between finances and other SDG trends. SDG Marking (financial flow) trends do not often align well with other SDG-related indicators, e.g., explicit reference to SDGs in Action Documents, EU Delegation perceptions, etc., and may therefore lead to uneven or erroneous conclusions on both investment and results. Greater guidance and oversight in SDG Marking is lacking due to limited resources and capacity. Marking tools are prone to errors and inconsistencies. Interviews with EU gender experts revealed that quality review of CRIS marking found 20% of contracts to be encoded with information different from the one recorded on Action Documents.

Goal versus target: Both the SDG Marker (Tool 3) and the TOSSD (Tool 4) currently mark only the SDG Goal, not the specific target. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals are defined in a list of 169 SDG Targets which are tracked by 232 unique Indicators. This focus comes with both advantages (it is simpler and leads to less double counting) and challenges (alignment to OECD and specific, higher resolution progress is not captured nor examined).

Financial flows are not results. Ensuring that the imminent GERF results and other pertinent core indicators are directly linked and regularly compared to SDG financial flows – thereby confirming the strength and direction of any relationships between them – may settle this concern.

Multiple and uncoordinated marking systems will lead to different results. CRIS (Tool 3/SDG Marker) and the classification system proposed by the evaluation team apply two different approaches to assign SDGs-- with very different results. Budget support marking in CRIS is duplicated by Budget Support experts with different results. TOSSD has an entirely different marking approach that builds on the CRIS Marker for DG INTPA, adding 29 other DGs. TOSSD also does not reflect the addition of “Main/Significant” SDG contributions, added to enhance reporting in CRIS. A majority of trust fund interventions are marked in CRIS despite separate marking by Trust fund experts.

Aggregated findings across the nine tools are featured in Table 4, with one row per tool. They reflect the familiarity of the tool, the SDG integration and the perceived relevance or performance of each tool (with evidence on any pertinent guidance). For familiarity and integration, colours portray best per category (in green) to least (in red).

Table 4. Synthesis of 9 tools

TOOL (T)	FAMILIARITY	INTEGRATION	RELEVANCE, PERFORMANCE GUIDANCE	MAIN CONCERNS
1.MIP (Template)	Well known	Good	Templates well known and appreciated	However, the links between SDGs and design is not easy to identify. SDG-related tools to date are generally retrospective, developed to classify actions and mark financial flows (intentions) at the end of the design phase. No visible intention found to use SDGs in any more structured or slightly more direct manner to inform the design of interventions.
2.AAP (Template)	Well known	Good	SDGs may inform the design and selection of interventions by influencing national investment plans (e.g., inside the MIPs)	
3.AD (Template) /SDG Marker	Best	Best	Marking has regularly improved in coverage	Only marking at goal level; weak guidance or marking applied without guidance (CS: Colombia, Mali, Moz.); No QA or incentives to mark more carefully; Inconsistencies: weak link with explicit mention in AD/docs; No specific attention to do no harm

TOOL (T)	FAMILIARITY	INTEGRATION	RELEVANCE, PERFORMANCE GUIDANCE	MAIN CONCERNS
4.TOSSD	Least well known	Main aim	Designed to track financial flows (beyond interventions) across 30 DGs; incorporates Tool 3; innovative approach to switch the focus from donor to recipient oriented financial tracking; good QA system	Limited to intentions (as proxies for action), marking only at goal level; No specific attention to do no harm. Too new to review impact (available for 3 years and continuously improving/ expanding)
5.SDG Mapper (JRC)	Little known	Best /High	Codes per SDG are wide, e.g., DG ECHO contributes to 16 SDGs	AI-NLP in documents not specific/able to distinguish intentions from actions
6.YPR (aka EAMR)	Well known	Low	Excellent monitoring source	Reportedly has been discontinued
7.SSC/ QRM	Little known	Least	Potentially good monitoring source	Weak evidence base (no explicit references found)
8. Annual DG Reports	Little known	Low	Most years mention all SDGs (Source: SDG Mapper)	Low specificity
9.GERF (aka EURF)	Least	Best /High	High expectations	Indicators noted to have low specificity albeit improving; Need to confirm link to SDG Marker/TOSSD and other core indicators; Results premature
Source: ADE				

Box 3 below summarizes succinctly a well-triangulated selection of *good practices and lessons to learn*, resulting from the above evaluation question (see definitions above for these terms).

Box 3. Good practice and lessons to learn for SDGs & tools

GOOD PRACTICE	LESSONS TO LEARN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SDG Marking: EU tools, many compulsory, have widely increased SDG familiarity among EU actors. SDG marking of financial flows (Tool 3) has been useful-instrumental—as an accountability mechanism, to track global volumes of spending and intention. Templates that make SDG classification mandatory are deemed clear and well supported 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a lack of coordination in marking efforts. CRIS marking is conducted differently than TOSSD (e.g., in the range of DGs included or employing different processes/checks); budget support and trust funds are conducting SDG independently marking (despite the parallel CRIS marking). There is little supervision of CRIS to ensure consistency. Marking of financial flows does not inform decision making at any level. SDGs generally do not explicitly inform the selection or design of interventions, across any tool.

GOOD PRACTICE	LESSONS TO LEARN
<p>(and could be further supported by the TEI/Global Gateway).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adding new tools: EU has regularly added new tools aiming to improve EU contributions to SDGs, as gaps are identified. This includes SDG Mapper, TOSSD and GERF.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There is no clear guidance on how SDGs should be used by EU Delegations. It is today unclear what further use EU has for the SDG Framework beyond SDG marking of financial flows and the GERF.• Many contributions to SDGs appear to be driven by other mechanisms, not the 9 tools.• A tool that was not found but could benefit many levels is a mechanism to more deliberately check that a focus on one SDG does not harm another.

EQ2 – Progress on SDGs enhanced by partnership; but SDG framework not used to organize coordination.

EQ 2: To what extent have partnerships and coordination enhanced SDG results?

This question examines how and to what extent EU collaborations and partnerships with other players have contributed to SDG progress, as well as leveraged the SDG framework in this direction. EU efforts to collaborate with EU MS (particularly in the forms of Joint Programming and Team Europe Initiatives) were also included in the assessment. The question also explores the difference between DG INTPA and DG NEAR in their efforts to integrate the SDGs and results obtained.

Summary answer:

- While SDGs are used in framing EU partnerships and dialogue at a high level, coordination and dialogue at the operational level is not centred on SDGs. As a result, there have been missed opportunities to further leverage the SDG framework, such as for use of SDG-based data for decision making among national governments and partners.
- Collaboration and coordination among stakeholders can improve SDG progress, but examples are limited.
- SDGs were leveraged, to at least some extent, to frame EU dialogue and collaboration with partner countries and other donors at a high level. However, they were used only marginally at the operational level, i.e., to support concrete joint action design and operationalisation, including of Team Europe Initiatives.
- The EU sets a high standard among global community partners in terms of SDG mainstreaming.
- While DG INTPA and DG NEAR achieved a similar level of SDG mainstreaming, the SDG framework is perceived to be more useful in supporting the programming of DG INTPA than for DG NEAR actions; this in consideration of the former being chiefly guided by development logics, while the latter are more tightly connected to neighbourhood policies and priorities.
- The EU supported the UN in mainstreaming the SDG framework within its partner country governments but did not take a leadership role.

In the 2016-2022 period, the EU improved its efforts to strengthen multilateralism and collaboration with like-minded actors. There is a clear logical case supported by evidence that dialogue, collaboration and coordination among donors and other multilateral actors has helped enhance the development in partner countries, and as part of that, also the progress on the SDGs. In particular, several interviewees noted that collaboration and coordination contributed to overall better effectiveness and efficiency on development, including SDG progress, compared to what could have been achieved in the absence of collaboration.²⁶

The SDG framework was deemed useful and featured prominently in high-level policy dialogue and collaboration frameworks, including most notably the New European Consensus for Development (adopted in 2017), which framed the collaboration between the EU and MS in external actions; and the Joint Communique between the EU and the UN: a renewed partnership in

²⁶ Among specific examples made in interviews were the case of the EU Trust Fund for Peace in Colombia, which is supported by 21 EU MS, Chile and the UK, and which has significantly contributed to progress on SDGs, particularly SDG 16 (according to interviewees both from the Colombian government and the EU delegation as well as documentation reviewed); and in Armenia, the fact that the EU intervened to fill “gaps” left by other development actors, identified at least in part with the support of the UN Resident Coordinator office based on a SDG analysis. Also, 73.5% of EU officers surveyed during this study perceive that the extent to which EU contributions to SDGs are complementary to those of other donors is either medium (42.5%) or high (31%).

development issued in 2018. Both these documents clearly established the 2030 Agenda as the vision and framework on which collaboration is to be based. The SDGs are also reported by EU headquarter officers to be a basis for high-level dialogue both with partner governments and other international development actors, including IFIs, the OECD and UN agencies, as well as within international for a such as the UN and the G20. The SDGs were frequently described as a “common basis” that all actors agree with, and that can therefore be used as a starting point for further collaboration. Also, EU officers surveyed as part of this study mostly indicated a significant level of collaboration on SDGs among donors and other international development actors (67.7% estimated the level of collaboration on SDGs to be high or medium).

However, the **SDG framework proved less useful to support the collaboration on the day-to-day operational level.** In fact, it was reported that the SDGs are considered to have a marginal influence at most within the negotiation, design and implementation of concrete programs and interventions that are to be implemented jointly or in delegated cooperation. These discussions were, further to development effectiveness principles, instead framed around partner country National Development Plans (NDPs) or other geographic and thematic priorities. This trend was observed consistently, independently of whether interventions or programs were implemented at the country, regional or the global level. It is however worth noting that an increasing number of NDPs and other partner country strategic documentation is aligned to SDGs, which indirectly leads to alignment of initiatives of the EU and other international community actors to SDGs.²⁷

Related, documentation of projects supported by the EU prepared by non-EU actors (including UN Agencies) only very occasionally referred to SDGs.²⁸ The finding is also consistent with previous research on the topic.²⁹

Four factors identified in interviews likely contributed to the scarce usage of the SDG framework to support cooperation at the operational level:

1. **The high-level nature of the SDGs may not be suitable to support the in-depth understanding of problems and the operationalisation of interventions.** The SDG framework provides a common and agreed reference against which all countries can be measured and compared. Their high-level nature, however, makes them rather unsuited to support in-depth analysis, definition and discussion of complex, nuanced issues, some of which are not yet fully understood. More often than not, there is a need to develop approaches that have a level of specificity superior to that of SDGs, and that require more granular or specifically-designed indicators to meaningfully measure progress. The fact that not all INTPA core indicators are tagged to SDGs means that the latter did not fully trickle down to the operational level. This factor also affected SDG mainstreaming within the EU, as developed in Evaluation Question 3 below. (For an example, see box 5 below.)
2. **Varying level of familiarity and mainstreaming of the SDG framework exist among actors** (i.e., donors and recipients). In particular, interviewees widely reported that, within local actors, it is only possible to have a meaningful dialogue on the SDGs at the national government level (and even so, not in all cases), as local administrations and NGOs are often

²⁷ This trend was observed consistently independently of whether interventions or programs were implemented at the country, regional or the global level. It is however worth noting that an increasing number of NDPs and other partner country strategic documentation is aligned to SDGs, which indirectly leads to alignment of initiatives of the EU and other international community actors to SDGs. (Source: case studies.)

²⁸ As part of the elaboration of case studies, the evaluation team reviewed the documentation relative to 27 interventions. While references to SDGs were typically found in all documents elaborated by the EU (including programming documents, reports, and ROM reports), this was much less the case in documentation prepared by other stakeholders.

²⁹ Coherently, the extent to which EU officers surveyed perceived that the SDG framework supported the coordination with other donors was significantly lower compared to the extent to which they perceived complementarity of EU contributions to SDGs compared to those of other donors. (11.5% high, 33.3% medium, 26.4% low, and 11.5% not at all, with 11.5% expressing no opinion; versus 31% high, 42.5% medium, 14.9% low and 3.4% not at all, with 8% expressing no opinion). The survey included both headquarters and EU delegation officers.

not sufficiently familiar with the framework.³⁰ Action is nonetheless being taken – particularly by the UN and through UNDP – to progressively familiarize these actors with the SDG framework. Significant differences and a generally lower familiarity with the SDG framework were also reported to exist among donors, including EU MS.³¹

3. **Guidance from EU headquarters on how the SDG framework should be leveraged in cooperation and coordination with other actors is insufficient**, particularly at the operational level – i.e., to support the negotiation, design, and implementation of actions in collaboration with partner governments and other donors. In line with this, the interviews underscored a lack of clarity on whether the EU Commission expects the SDG framework to be systematically used in those processes at all (i.e., beyond the identification of SDGs to which collaboration areas and interventions defined relate to).
4. **There is insufficient availability of country-level data on SDGs** (e.g., statistics on SDG achievement, or data on national financing of SDGs) to sustain discussion on them. Progress is being made on this front; processes and guidance that facilitate the incorporation of such data in decision making are still lacking.

The SDGs were also reportedly discussed only marginally within the framing of in-country EU and EU Member States collaboration strategies. However, Joint Programming documents resulting from discussions often (though not always) explicitly link actions with the SDGs they contribute to (analogously to MIPs/Tool 1³²). Similarly, albeit there is no evidence of SDGs having a central role in the development of Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs), TEI summary sheets systematically identify actions that are expected to contribute to SDGs³³.

Concerning SDG achievement, the regression exercise performed during this study showed that investment in SDG 13 was associated with higher SDG achievement in countries where Joint Programming processes were taking place (i.e., each euro spent corresponded on average to +4.24% more progress). However, no significant relation was observed for the other SDGs.

The EU sets a high standard within the international development community in terms of SDG mainstreaming, particularly in the case of international action. The EU has been a strong supporter of Agenda 2030 since its ideation.³⁴ This has included a significant effort to mainstream SDGs within the EU's policies, communication, and way of working. In particular, within external action (the scope of this evaluation), progressively since 2015 and almost entirely since 2019, each EU initiative and commitment has been “marked” according to the SDGs it is expected to contribute to. This allows reporting on EU financial flows targeting SDGs, including to the OECD. As of 2020, the EU was the

³⁰ The finding is consistent with survey results: only 11.5% of (EU) respondents reported local national governments to have a strong level of ownership of the SDG framework, while 36,8% assessed the level of ownership as medium and 46% as low (the remaining 5.7% declined to answer). Also, 19.5% of respondents reported making high use of the SDGs as a reference for dialogue and negotiations with national governments, and 35.6% making medium. Both these percentages are significantly lower (11.5% and 26.4%) for dialogue with sub-national administrations.

³¹ This is based on interviews and survey results which indicate that only 37% of EU officers who responded perceived strong alignment of EU Member States with the SDGs, while only 23% reported strong alignment for national governments of partner countries.

³² See EQ 1 for more detail.

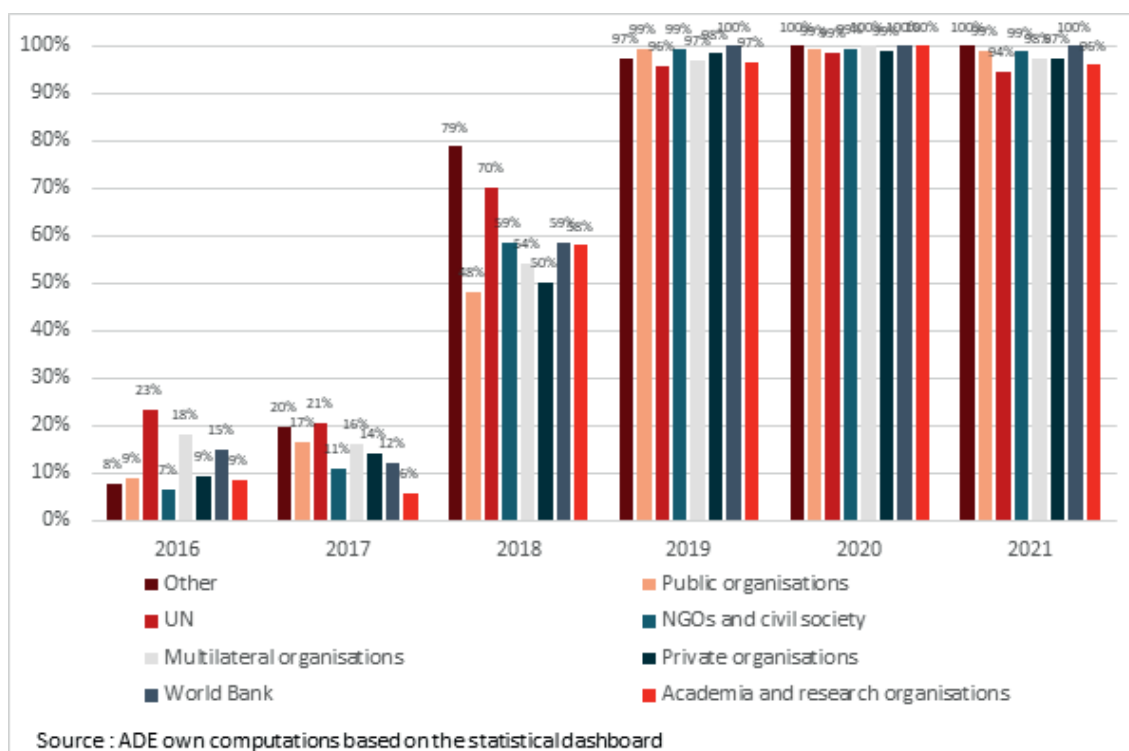
³³ As published on the Capacity4Dev website. It appears, however, that this identification is not made in-country (i.e., by the EU Delegations) as part of the TEI negotiations, but rather subsequently at EU headquarters.

³⁴ Although the EU was not formally part of the Open Working Group that drafted the SDGs (as it is not a UN Member State), the EU has significantly influenced the 2030 Agenda negotiation and approval processes, contributing to achieve an outcome document that was seen as well-aligned with EU priorities and vision. (Sources: EU internal reporting on negotiations with the UN.) Also, during interviews conducted for this evaluation, the EU was often referred to as “the UN's main ally in the implementation of the SDGs”.

largest international donor to do so³⁵, as well as to report this information systematically³⁶. In addition, the EU has introduced at least nine tools to support mainstreaming of SDGs in its operations, particularly programming and reporting processes (see EQ1)³⁷; the effects of these efforts in terms of building SDG awareness (both within the EU and with other stakeholders) were recognised in several of the interviews conducted for this evaluation, particularly by UN and partner country government interviewees. This compared favourably with the activities of other members of the international development community. The TOSSD is the latest contribution to SDG financial flow marking and provides an entirely new and enviable method (see details in EQ1).

Both DG INTPA and DG NEAR have incorporated the practice of marking all their funded interventions according to the SDGs they are expected to contribute to. (Previous to 2019, DG NEAR progressed in this sense slightly faster than DG INTPA). SDG marking has been mainstreamed consistently across all types of EU's implementing partners.

Figure 8. Share of Contracts reporting SDG per channel, per year (2016-2021)



However, the SDG framework was observed to be more “central” to DG INTPA’s strategy and vision than is the case for DG NEAR. In fact, while the SDG focus was explicitly incorporated in DG INTPA’s strategic plans (both for the 2016-2020 and the 2020-2024 periods), no explicit mention of the SDGs or the Agenda 2030 was made in DG NEAR’s plans for the same periods. Interviews with both headquarter and in-country personnel connected this with the different mission and objectives of the two DGs: while DG INTPA’s work is centred around supporting development in partner countries and thus immediately relatable to the SDGs, DG NEAR’s objectives are more tightly linked to neighbourhood policies and political priorities and the pursuit of public administration

³⁵ The largest ODA provider countries in 2020 were the United States and Germany, which do not report on SDGs. These were followed by the EU, and then by the UK (which does not report on SDGs) and Japan and France (which report on SDGs). (Source: analysis performed as part of the OECD reporting Case Study, based on OECD and EU data.) As of 2020, over half of global ODA is not explicitly associated to SDGs.

³⁶ Some donors report the SDG focus of a share of their interventions only. (Source: see previous note.)

³⁷ Including most notably the ones described in more detail within EQ1.

reform, including towards approximation with EU practices. As such, while DG NEAR's actions naturally tend to support SDGs (and SDG mainstreaming has been incorporated in processes and practices), they tend to be conceived following a logic that is less directly aligned.

Although acting decisively to mainstream the SDGs within its own external action, the EU has not assumed a leadership role to promote or coordinate SDG mainstreaming by other actors. It has, however, provided support in this direction to the UN, in a significant but mainly financial way. Since the launch of the 2030 Agenda, the UN has acted to incentivize mainstreaming of SDGs by governments and other actors globally. Most notably, it supports governments to integrate SDGs in their funding, budgeting, and reporting systems, processes, and strategies, including through the Integrated National Financing Frameworks (INFFs) projects. The EU has provided significant financial support to the INFFs and other projects with similar objectives, both through the Joint SDG Fund³⁸ and directly. In addition, though in a less systematic fashion, the EU has also provided strategic support through its participation in country INFF committees and through institutional backing or influencing the UN's facilitation of dialogue with recipient governments.

The EU has refrained from taking a more direct role to promote the mainstreaming of SDGs within partner countries or donors' governments. In fact, several EU interviewees (at different levels) conveyed that this is a role the UN should continue to play, with the EU mainly influencing. However, some UN interviewees commented that a more active role on the part of the EU in supporting mainstreaming could be highly beneficial. More specifically, the EU may be well placed (and better so than the UN) to foster the use of SDG-based information that is progressively available in some countries (e.g., developed through INFFs), within dialogue in international fora, and particularly in framing its collaboration with EU MS.

Beyond "formal" support to mainstreaming, several UN stakeholders interviewed reported that the EU was needed to continue to keep the SDGs alive and promote the use of SDG language within partner country administrations.

The SDG framework lends itself readily to an assessment of development sectors that merit attention within a country; it is relatively simple to identify sectors receiving less investment than needed to improve goal achievement. Some practices or intentions in this sense were evidenced e.g., in Armenia (the SDG assessment exercise was conducted by the UN Resident Coordinator office, which then asked for EU support to address some gaps); in Bangladesh (in donor coordinator meetings, attention may be given to specific SDG indicators on a per need basis) and in Colombia (reports on investment by SDGs are expected to give visibility to which areas are being better addressed or left behind). However, none of these practices appears to be institutionalised, nor to be given visibility and shared. An additional benefit of the SDG framework is that it can support an unbiased assessment even when country or donor political priorities shift.

Last, some coordination issues exist among donors as to "mainstreaming standards". In particular, reporting to the OECD on financial flows related to SDGs is conducted using methodologies that may strongly differ among donors. Some, for example, report only in relation to a subset of SDGs that they identify as priority. Or they allow only one or several SDGs per action to be indicated³⁹. The definition of reporting standards to ensure better comparability and usability of data appears lacking.

³⁸ The UN Joint SDG Fund was launched in 2018 to support countries in developing the capacity to work across policy domains in an integrated manner, thus stimulating an enabling environment for SDG investments. As of end 2022, it had capitalised a total of USD 260 million, of which USD 33.2 million was contributed by EU institutions. Up to 2022, the EU institutions were the third largest contributor to the fund after Sweden and Spain. As one of the Joint SDG fund largest contributors, the EU is also member of its Strategic Advisory Group. Since 2020, the Joint SDG Fund has been financially supporting INFF projects.

³⁹ The latter is the case of the EU.

Box 4 below summarizes succinctly a well-triangulated selection of *good practices and lessons to learn*, resulting from the above evaluation question (see definitions above for these terms).

Box 4. Good practice and lessons to learn for SDGs & partnership

GOOD PRACTICE	LESSONS TO LEARN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SDGs inspiring high-level and central dynamics: SDG framework has featured prominently in high-level policy dialogue and was supported by EU priorities and approaches to bolster awareness among DGs. SDGs have been promoted as a “common alphabet”. • EU support of the use of the SDG framework in collaboration and coordination with donors and multilateral actors; and of the use of SDG language in Joint Programming documents. • Promising work is underway with the UNDP and INFF which opens doors for EU to contribute to SDG governance and coordination. • SDG mainstreaming: EU sets a high standard among the international development community in terms of SDG mainstreaming. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SDF framework has proven less useful to the EU to guide collaboration at the operational level. Usage of the SDG framework in donor collaboration fora was generally scattered and non-institutionalised. • There is no consensus on whether or how the SDGs should support in-depth and joint analysis. Despite a unified vision, Agenda 2030 does not articulate how collaboration should be operationalised; nor does EU. • Guidance on how the SDG framework should be leveraged in cooperation is lacking. Understanding of SDGs is not even across actors or partners, especially but not only inside EU. • SDGs are observed to be considerably more central to certain actors: DG INTPA when compared to DG NEAR, CSOs who appear to lack incentives for SDGs, and other entities beyond development conference circles.

EQ3 – Inconsistent mainstreaming has led to varying levels of SDG integration

EQ3: To what extent have SDGs been mainstreamed throughout EU practice and thinking?

This question focuses on mainstreaming as defined for the purposes of this evaluation: explicitly introducing approaches across multiple units/sectors/levels with an aim of advancing positive SDG achievement. According to this definition, while mainstreaming is a (usually deliberate) process, integration is the result of this process, i.e., the SDGs become integral parts of the whole EU's way of working. Mainstreaming is examined here through many lenses such as across EU entities, programme cycles, aid modalities, partners (e.g., EU MS) or across multiple levels (central/HQ/region/country as well as across countries with varying levels of risk or need.

Summary answer:

- The strongest mainstreaming of SDGs has been at the policy level, which displays a high level of alignment between EU policy and the SDG framework. Due to constraints on resources, the overall process of mainstreaming SDGs across the intervention cycle has been somewhat inconsistent and irregular, leading to differing levels of SDG integration.
- The SDGs have been increasingly mainstreamed in policies, programming documents and project documents, reflecting an effort to use the framework as the language of external action and the introduction of specific tools and the overall alignment of EU policies to the SDG framework.
- Integration of SDGs in the design of external actions is relatively low, reflecting the choice to orient the design of actions on the basis of common political interest. The mainstreaming of the SDG framework is indeed observed to happen at the end of the design stage when most of the design is already completed. Nevertheless, a high percentage of the surveyed EU staff perceives the SDGs to be strongly integrated, while there is no evidence for this in the field, pointing to a strong assumption made by EU stakeholders that SDGs are automatically and implicitly mainstreamed in actions, cascading from the alignment of higher-level priorities.
- The SDGs have not been mainstreamed in subsequent programming cycle steps such as results monitoring and reporting. This, among other factors, limited the extent to which mainstreaming leads to positive SDG achievement.
- Mainstreaming fatigue is observed; around half of stakeholders surveyed perceived that the SDGs are decreasing in importance at the Commission.

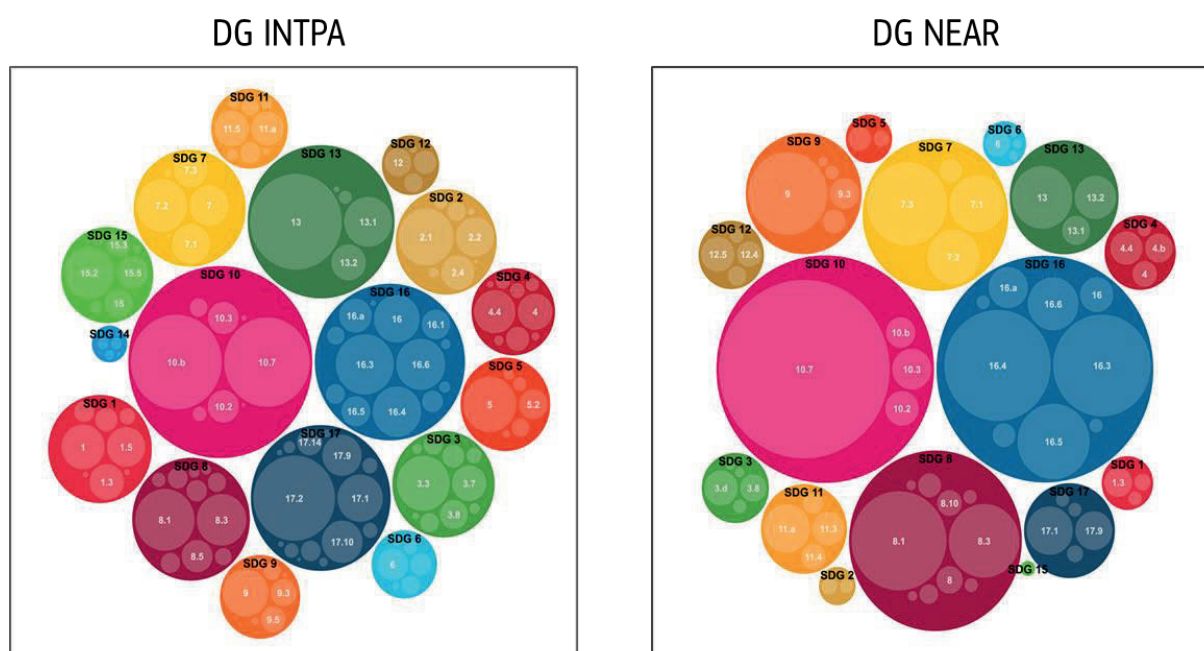
Mainstreaming has been assessed 1) across the overall EU Commission, DG NEAR, and DG INTPA high level policies, strategic orientations, and priorities and 2) across the different phases of the EU external action intervention cycle: programming, design, implementation, and closure. Findings show that the EU has achieved a moderate to high level of SDG mainstreaming across its external action. More specifically, while priorities set in high level strategic and policy documents of the Commission demonstrate a high level of SDG alignment, inconsistent processes of mainstreaming across the intervention cycle have led to varying levels of SDG integration. There is still work to be done to ensure that the SDGs are fully integrated across all phases of the intervention cycle. The elements below are presented following these phases.

The priorities of the European Commission show a high level of alignment with the SDG framework. Key policy documents for the period 2016-2021 show effective integration of SDGs into EU policies. The analysis of high-level strategic and policy documents indicates that SDGs were

addressed in almost all sampled documents from 2016-2021⁴⁰. Interviews revealed that the alignment of EU priorities with the SDG framework had become more noticeable, particularly after Commissioner von der Leyen's appointment, as communication was adjusted to better underscore the alignment. Informants have noted an increase in the presence of SDG language in significant policy and political documents, such as Mission Letters to Commissioners. Additionally, survey results show that 89% of respondents believe that the Commission's current priorities are moderately or strongly aligned with the SDGs. Notably, stakeholders' perceptions and documents confirmed that EU priorities have always been aligned to the SDG framework, owing to the role played by the EU in the definition of the SDGs, but that alignment had not always been communicated as clearly in the past as it was done in the last years.

Similarly, the priorities of DG NEAR and DG INTPA are closely aligned with the SDG framework, according to the survey results and an analysis of annual reports using the SDG mapper. Specifically, 92% of the respondents believed that the DG NEAR and DG INTPA priorities are moderately or strongly aligned with the SDGs. An analysis of annual reports of DG NEAR and DG INTPA reveals strong integration of SDGs into their reporting. In terms of specific SDGs, DG INTPA appears to prioritize SDGs 10, 16, 13, and 17, whereas DG NEAR prioritizes SDGs 10⁴¹, 7, 16, and 17. In both cases, the key focal areas reflect the DG's strategic theme and priorities, which slightly differ in terms of emphasis.

Figure 9. Alignment of DG INTPA and DG NEAR annual reports with SDG framework



Source: ADE with data processed by the SDG mapper

Note: The evaluation team processed all annual reports between 2016 and 2021.

⁴⁰ Based on the mainstreaming index built for the purpose of the evaluation. SDG 8 and SDG 16 have been cited most in this context followed by SDG 10, SDG 13, and SDG 1. See Annex 9 for details on the list of documents and the methodology used.

⁴¹ The figure shows a focus on SDG target 10.7 at DG NEAR, which concerns migration. This is probably due to the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis in the Neighbourhood during the period of the evaluation.

Box 5. Mainstreaming index methodology

The evaluation team constructed a mainstreaming index as an innovative way to quantitatively assess the level of SDG integration in EU external action. The calculation of the mainstreaming index is dependent on three core areas: policy (strategic documents and overarching SDG-related documents), programming (MIPs, AAPs, SSFs, NIPs, and Joint Programming strategies), and funding.

Key to the innovation in this approach is the use of natural language processing to extract and structure information from the document texts. The team developed a unique text-mining algorithm based on keyword matching and keyword extraction⁴². This algorithm is built to mine documents for data encompassing four key themes: Guidance (use of the SDG framework in context sections), Objectives (link from the objectives to SDGs), Results (link between the expected intervention results and SDGs) and Impact (how the expected impact is linked to one or more SDGs). An overview of the result is presented in Figure 10 below. Details on the methodology used are presented in Annex 9 of the Volume II of this report.

The definition of country-level priorities is not directly based on the SDGs⁴³, but rather on the intersection between EU and partner countries common areas of interest, as confirmed by all geographic case studies and stakeholders from HQ⁴⁴, covering both DG NEAR and DG INTPA. While not using the SDGs in the identification of policy priorities mostly reflects the deliberate choice to identify priorities based on the EU and national authorities' shared interest, it also mirrors the varying degrees of alignment of partner countries with the SDG framework and low appeal of the framework for communication of political priorities⁴⁵, as also evidenced by the survey (only 23% of the respondents perceived national government priorities to strongly align to the SDGs⁴⁶).

There is little evidence of explicit mainstreaming of the SDGs in the design of action. This contrasts with a high share of EU actors who perceive the SDGs to be strongly or moderately used in most phases of the EU intervention cycle, particularly in the design (indicated by 81% of EU stakeholders). However, evidence from multiple case studies points towards a commonly shared assumption among EU stakeholders that the mainstreaming of SDGs would automatically cascade from the overall alignment of EU external action priorities to the SDG framework. This assumption has been reflected in interviews with multiple stakeholders stating that SDGs were in the EU's external action "DNA" such that SDGs would be implicitly mainstreamed in all action.

Programming documents⁴⁷ increasingly incorporated an SDG perspective between 2016 and 2021. Overall, the mainstreaming index identified an increasing trend of SDG mainstreaming between 2016 and 2019 in all assessment criteria (context, objective, results, impact), especially for documents linking the main objectives of their actions and expected results to the SDGs. As depicted in Figure 10, the share of documents reporting one or more SDGs in the context of their objective rose from 54% in 2016 to 81% in 2019. The share of documents linking expected intervention results to the SDGs grew from 67% in 2016 to 87% in 2019. Though still relatively

⁴² These 4 key themes are represented in the text mining algorithm by a pool of keywords generated automatically by using a python library, the [wordnet-synsets](#) method, which is validated by an online dictionary. WordNet is a lexical database, or dictionary, for the English language that was created specifically for natural language processing. For more information see the technical annex.

⁴³ In cases where the partner country's priorities are based on SDGs, it can then be the case that the EU priorities, by reflecting the country priorities, are indirectly based on SDGs.

⁴⁴ All interviews confirmed that there was, is, and will be no intention or willingness from the European Commission to use SDGs for identification or 'design', which is solely based on shared political interest.

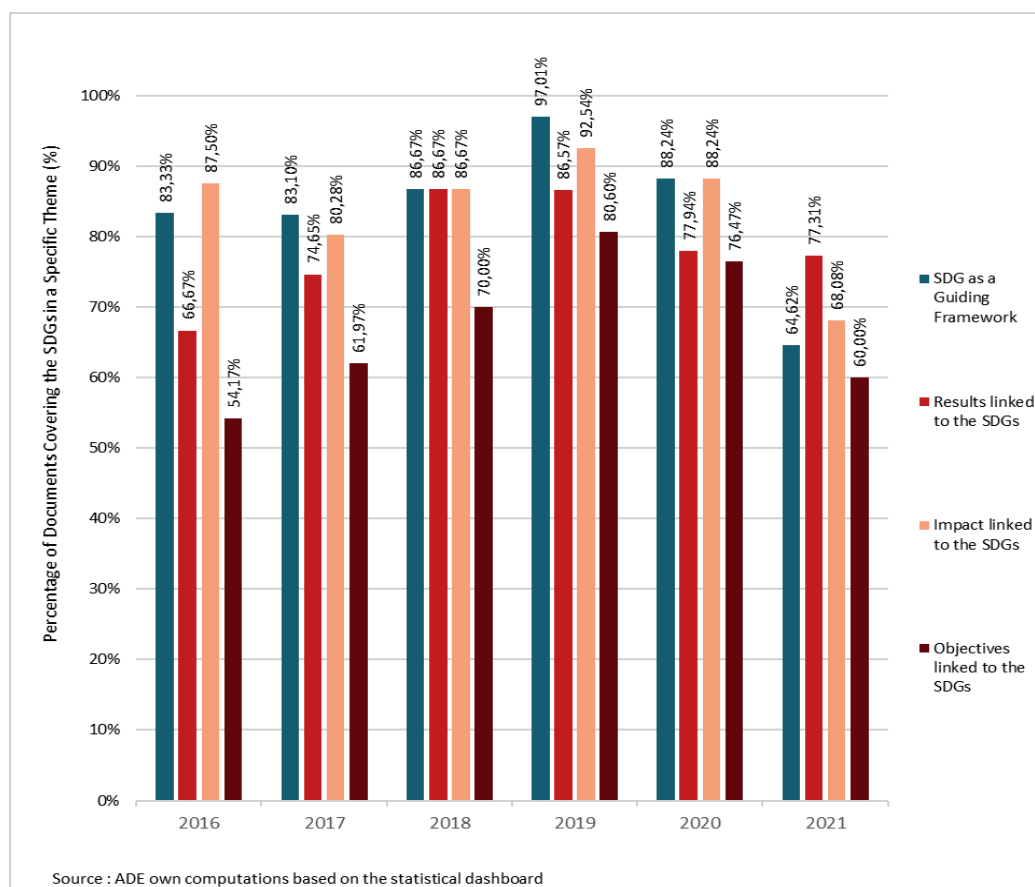
⁴⁵ As was confirmed in interviews (MN 108, MN 114, MN 200).

⁴⁶ Survey.

⁴⁷ The programming process starts with the identification of policy priorities at country/regional/ thematic level in coordination with partner countries, which are then translated into MIPs, AAPs, and ADs.

high, the level of SDG mainstreaming in programming documents has decreased throughout all assessment criteria since 2019. Overall, mandatory tools (as examined in EQ1) such as the MIP and AAP have been conducive to the integration of the SDGs. These tools have helped to promote awareness and ensure that the SDGs are noted and addressed in various actions. Stakeholders in EU delegation also confirmed that these tools and their compulsory nature forced them to think deeper regarding the SDGs concerned by their action⁴⁸.

Figure 10. Share of documents reporting one or more SDG by assessment criterion



Individual SDGs have benefitted from various degrees of mainstreaming at the programming stage. SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth) and SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions) largely dominate the focus at the objective, result, and impact levels. SDG 1 (No poverty) was also given significant importance, mostly at the objective level, and to a lesser extent also at the result level. SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities) appeared mostly at the result level, but not as strongly at the objective and impact level. SDGs that benefitted from sustained but less intensive mainstreaming are SDG 5 (Gender equality), which was mainstreamed at all levels (intervention objective, result, and impact), and SDG 13 (Climate action), which only appeared at the level of expected results. Notably, SDG 14 (Life under water) is largely absent at all levels of action.

Evidence from case studies points to **SDGs being mainstreamed in programming and design documents during the last steps of the action design process.** This naturally lowers the chance for the SDG framework to meaningfully affect the design and subsequent implementation and monitoring of the actions, with some stakeholders pointing to a tick-the-box process. Other stakeholders perceived that the SDG framework's influence on design of individual actions might be limited due to its nature of higher-level framework. In general, there was no common understanding

⁴⁸ MN 111, MN 113, MN 115.

of how to “do” SDG in practice. Still, SDG mainstreaming into programming and design documents suggests a growing awareness of the SDGs framework as the vocabulary for communicating about policy and intervention objectives, results, and impact.

There were indications of mainstreaming fatigue, which concerns cross-cutting topics in general but also specifically SDGs. In some EU Delegations, this is represented sometimes as a challenge by stakeholders who perceived the demand to integrate SDG as yet an additional burden into their work. In addition, almost half of EU staff who responded to the survey perceived a decreased interest for SDG from HQ. Stakeholders quoted that “buzzwords lose their shine.”⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that gender and environmental issues, which both have more than two decades of experience (and important resources) with mainstreaming, had to develop strategies to ensure mainstreaming remained meaningful and ensured transformation conducive of change. In the case of the environment, it was decided to move from mainstreaming of environmental issues to “greening” which supposes that environment is embedded in all actions and that a do-no-harm approach is in place⁵⁰. In the case of gender, mainstreaming fatigue was counteracted through awareness raising and spending targets were considered to be a “game-changer”.⁵¹

“Mainstreaming as a concept is an indication that something is missing in the way we do things and we need an additional effort to make sure that the missing thing is integrated. Mainstreaming is about self-critique, once things are integrated you don’t need to mainstream anymore.” Team Leader of the greening facility, DG INTPA.

Consistent and complete adoption of SDG reporting practices depend on the extent to which they are made mandatory or not. In 2021, almost all contracts (interventions in CRIS) were marked⁵² with at least one SDG. The level of SDG marking has considerably increased across all aid modalities and geographies since 2018, when only 53% of all contracts reported at least one SDG^{53,54}. This steep increase reflects an evolution in guidance which made marking compulsory as of 2019. Across aid modalities, blending operations had the steepest rate of adoption, with 85% of contracts reporting at least one SDG in 2018, as compared to 7% one year before. The use of “Main SDG” in financial marking⁵⁵ experienced a similar trend, with slow adoption throughout the years until it was also made mandatory at the end of 2021.

Mainstreaming has varied by field of action and SDGs were perceived to be less suitable in some contexts. These are some of the factors that have made the SDGs less suitable:

- **Contexts with high political stakes**, or where there is a degree of disagreement between various partners. One stakeholder summarised this as the SDGs being “too consensual”, “what we agree on”, or the “smallest common denominator”⁵⁶. The SDGs are not seen as a suitable framework to advance where there is less consensus.
- **The high-level nature of the SDGs** made them less suitable for supporting the in-depth understanding of problems and the operationalisation of interventions. Differences in the

⁴⁹ MN 120.

⁵⁰ MN 120.

⁵¹ MN 121.

⁵² Once a programme’s implementation phase starts, intervention-related contracts are “SDG-Marked” and encoded in a common database (CRIS) for reporting at different levels. This financial SDG marking is done as part of the Action Document stage (cf. EQ 1, Tool 3).

⁵³ Notably, 100% of budget support operations are tagged with SDGs at the level of disbursement tranche in a separate database dedicated to budget support operations only. This separate marking is performed by a team different than the one doing the marking in Action Documents and CRIS.

⁵⁴ FPI had a faster adoption: 50% of FPI contracts reported at least one SDG in 2016; this share rapidly rose to 80% in 2017 and reached 95% by 2018 - one year before the introduction of mandatory reporting.

⁵⁵ The “Main-SDG” marking consist in identifying one and only one SDG as the main SDG focus of the project, and up to nine other SDGs that are significant foci.

⁵⁶ MN 108.

scope and breadth of SDGs⁵⁷ can negatively influence the ease of mainstreaming, with some SDGs deemed too broad for use in specific programming. (For an example, see Box 6 below.)

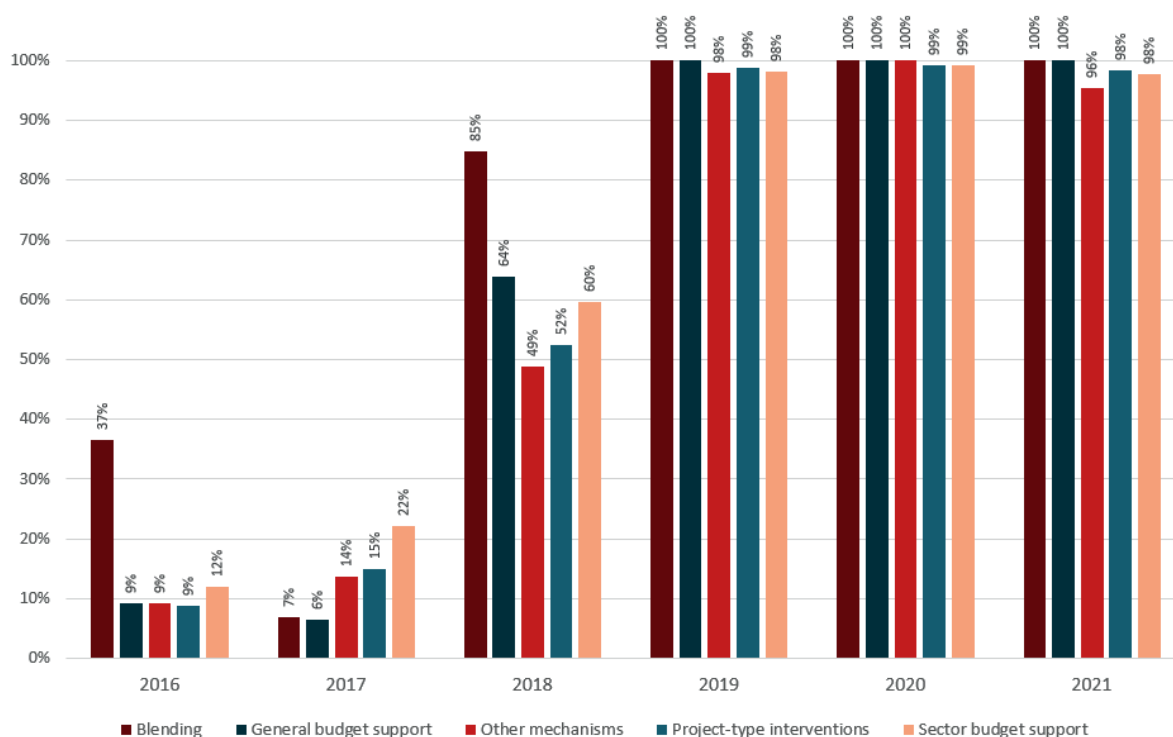
- **Varying levels of familiarity, mainstreaming of, and willingness to use the framework among development partners.** Partners with whom SDG mainstreaming was less easy to implement include IFIs⁵⁸, local actors⁵⁹ and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

Box 6. Reducing inequalities: the need to go beyond SDG 10

During the temporal scope of this evaluation, the EU has to a significant extent engaged in understanding the concept and features of inequality and in supporting partner countries in reducing different forms of inequalities.

Inequality is a multifaceted issue: the identification and definition of its different manifestations and drivers (which are reflected in the approaches needed to address it) have been central to the discussion, including in multilateral fora. While the launch of the Agenda 2010, and in particular the inclusion of SDG 10, have proven very useful to raise the visibility of the topic of inequality, the SDG framework eventually lost some traction in in-depth discussion and analysis. SDG 10 – including its declination in targets and indicators – ultimately proved to be insufficiently sophisticated and granular to meaningfully support analysis, action design and reporting.

Figure 11. Share of contracts reporting SDG per aid modality, per year (2016-2021)



Source: ADE own computations based on the EU statistical dashboard.

⁵⁷ As also evidenced in the SDG-Mapper Case study.

⁵⁸ Cooperation with IFIs under blending modality showed that often they are business oriented not development goals oriented. The evidence showed that the reporting frameworks developed for cooperation IFIs were outputs focus paying less attention to outcomes and impact levels.

⁵⁹ MN 108, MN 111, MN 112, MN 113, MN 114, MN 115.

The degree of mainstreaming of the SDGs for monitoring and result reporting is relatively low. While 70% of EU stakeholders surveyed perceived the SDGs to be moderately or strongly used in the latter phases of the EU intervention cycle (monitoring and evaluation/audit (70%)), the evaluation found no evidence of such mainstreaming in documentation and cases studies. SDGs are nearly absent from the monitoring process and none of the case studies found evidence of the use of the SDG framework in the context of monitoring. For result reporting, the evaluation found attempts to collect and aggregate results on SDG indicators, although the data was not yet reliable for use in the context of the present evaluation. One exception concerns budget support operations. Indeed, the budget support database identifies one SDG at the level of each disbursement tranche and then tracks the fulfilment of the criteria set for the tranche's disbursement, indirectly tracking results specific to individual SDGs. It is expected that SDG mainstreaming for monitoring and reporting may improve with the introduction of the GEF as of January 2023, though it was too early at the time of the evaluation to assess its effects.

Box 7 below summarizes succinctly a well-triangulated selection of *good practices and lessons to learn*, resulting from the above evaluation question (see definitions above for these terms).

Box 7. Good practice and lessons to learn for SDGs & mainstreaming

GOOD PRACTICE	LESSONS TO LEARN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alignment to organisational priorities: Commission-wide, DG NEAR and DG INTPA priorities are closely aligned to SDG framework. The vdL commission is known internally as the "SDG" commission. The EU produced and published its first Voluntary Review in May 2023⁶⁰. Classifying SDGs in programme documents: Programming documents increasingly portrayed SDG mainstreaming between 2016 and 2021, as the requirement became known. This is most true specifically for SDGs 8, 16 and 1 (less for SDG 14). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Definition of partner country priorities is less aligned to SDGs. SDGs also need to be synergised with geopolitical interests. Little evidence of mainstreaming SDGs across processes that involve the selection and design of interventions as well as for monitoring and results. It is only in the very last steps of the design process when actions are "marked" for specific SDGs. There is evidence for mainstreaming fatigue that will need to be managed proactively, as 50% of EU staff perceive interest in SDGs to be decreasing at HQ. There are hopes that EUVR may reverse this trend. Lessons can be drawn on how the environment and gender sectors managed SDG mainstreaming dynamics. SDG mainstreaming appears less suitable – or less simple – in contexts with high political stakes, where in-depth understanding/high granularity is required. The SDG framework was less simple to use when working with IFIs and CSO.

⁶⁰ <https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/SDG-Report-WEB.pdf>

EQ4 – EU external action contributed significantly to SDG achievement and predates the mainstreaming efforts

EQ4: To what extent have EU (DG INTPA/DG NEAR) actions contributed to SDG progress?

This question is a high level one, anchored explicitly in the language of the Terms of Reference. A **contribution** is something that positively influences any SDG at any level in any geography resulting intentionally or not from action by any EU entity. As per the lexicon in Box 1, contributions may include SDG achievement by partner countries and/or all EU support aligned to influence that achievement.

Contribution analysis here is proposed as a mixed methods approach, including an in-depth quantitative exercise aimed at eliciting causality, centred on how efforts made by the EU triggered change leading to SDG achievement. The question was designed to increase understanding of why observed results may have occurred and the influence of direct/indirect and internal/external factors. It also builds on the SDG Theory of Change to compile evidence and a line of reasoning from which plausible links from EU actions to SDG achievement is drawn. Evidence compiled from all other EQs were directly considered as potential factors in this EQ.

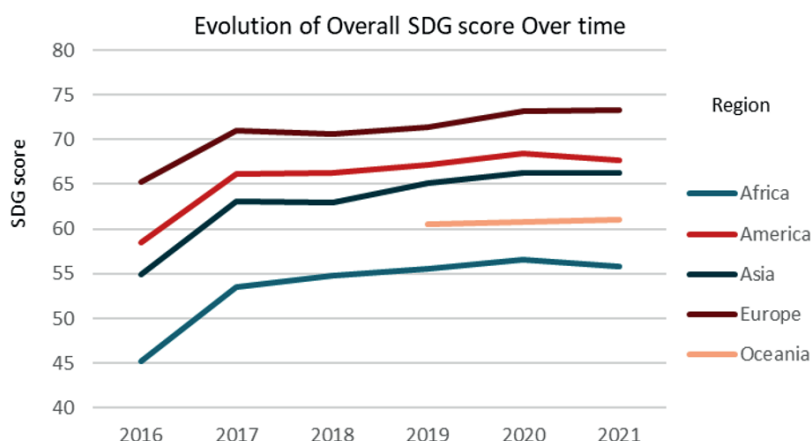
Summary answer:

- The EU contribution to SDGs is deemed real, positive, and often significant. There are, however, unfilled gaps that prevent the SDG achievement from advancing adequately.
- The contribution of EU-funded interventions to SDGs in partner countries was measured to be positive and statistically significant. The specific SDGs for which the contribution was significant differed by aid modality. The income level and fragility level of the recipient country also had an impact on the contribution of the sums that were spent.
- SDGs varied significantly across interventions marked. SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Growth), SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 5 (Gender equality) were the most frequently marked. This distribution is only partially reflected in funds allocation. In terms of funding flows, SDGs 16 and 8 received significantly more attention.
- An important limit to the identification of SDG contribution is the quality of the data available for both SDG goal/targets achievement and marked ODA funding streams.
- Beyond funding of interventions, the EU also aimed to contribute to the SDGs through non-spending activities, such as through a relevant policy landscape, efforts in coordination and coherence for development and resources (human and institutional) to support the mainstreaming of SDGs.
- The real but under-reported SDG marking of the EU over the period 2016-2021 is driven by the factors generally known to affect aid effectiveness such as the Busan Principles (including ownership, ...).
- Finally, the evaluation notes a caveat related to the interlinkage approach: more than half of all contracts referenced only a single SDG.

Worldwide, the period 2016-2021 saw a positive trend in SDG achievement as is pictured in Figure 12 below. It shows the positive trend in the SDG global score, combining progress on all the 17 SDGs over the six first years since the introduction of Agenda 2030. The COVID-19 pandemic however reversed the trend, as is visible in the evolution from 2020 to 2021. Notably, among EU stakeholders, 95% of respondents to the survey perceived the overall progress on the SDGs to be low. The EU has aimed to contribute to the overall progress through various means, including spending (funding of interventions) and non-spending (policies, political and policy dialogue, internal

tools and processes, partnership establishments...) activities. The sections below will explore first how the spending activities contributed to this progress, then turn to non-spending activities.

Figure 12. Evolution of overall SDG score worldwide



Source: Original graph with DPA.

Spending activities: funding of interventions and results

Over the period that was examined, the contribution of EU-funded projects to the overall progress on SDG implementation in partner countries was found to be positive and statistically significant. EU stakeholders also perceived the EU contribution to be moderate (50% of survey respondents) to high while some stakeholders (25%) considered the EU contribution to be low. In countries where the EU funded interventions, each Euro spent per capita is estimated to increase the SDG global score (from 0 – lowest possible achievement to 100 – highest possible achievement) by between 0.2 and 0.6 points⁶¹, on average. For instance, in a country with an SDG global score of 60 (which corresponds to the average score observed in EU partner countries), the EU spending one additional euro per capita (for example spending an additional EUR 10 million in a 10-million people country) would increase the global score from 60 to between 60.2 and 60.6, on average.

Contributions differed by SDG. A significant contribution was found for funding allocated to SDGs 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). The strongest effect was found for SDG 8, where spending one additional Euro per capita is found to increase the SDG 8 index by close to 1 point. For other SDGs, the contribution made by EU projects could not be statistically identified in the regression analysis. The reason for this is a mix between data quality and other factors. SDGs 9 and 11 display above-average data quality, with all indicators being collected in almost every country. They are among the three SDGs with the most complete progress datasets⁶². SDGs 9 is also a reported focus of interventions larger than average (in terms of amounts), such as large infrastructure projects funded through blending⁶³. Such projects mobilize large amounts of funding

⁶¹ Depending on model specification, as detailed in Annex 11 in volume II. The degree of reliability and limitations of the analysis are presented in the same annex. Considering an SDG Global indicator Score as the dependent variable, the independent factors most influential for EU contributions are, on the positive side, GDP per capita, and trade openness. On the negative side population density, government expenditure, age dependency ratio, and importance of primary sector are the most influential factors.

⁶² According to the SDG Index Methodology guide

⁶³ SDG 9 is also one of the focal points of the Global Gateway (GG), although as the GG strategy started implementation in 2021, it cannot be the driver of the contribution to SDG 9 over the 2016-2021 period. The GG rather continues with an already present focus on, among others, SDG 9.

and generate progress that is being captured rapidly by SDG indicators. For SDG 8, while the data quality is not above average, the dataset (data quantity) is larger. SDG 8 is one of the most frequently marked SDGs in EU external action, and the second most funded SDG (after SDG 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). A larger dataset makes the identification of statistical significance easier.

The EU contribution differed by aid modality. The type of aid modality was found to be important to achieve specific SDGs. General **Budget Support** was found to have a positive and significant influence on SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Sectoral Budget Support had a measurable positive influence on SDGs 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and 17 (Partnership for the Goals), as well as on the overall SDG score. **Project-type** interventions made a measurable positive contribution to SDG 5 (Gender Equality), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), 15 (Life on Land), 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), as well as on the overall SDG score⁶⁴. **Blending** interventions had a positive impact on SDGs 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and 15 (Life on Land) as well as on the overall SDG score. The distribution of results reflects the SDGs most frequently marked⁶⁵ under each modality.

Table 5. Top 4 SDGs marked in CRIS and SDGs with measurable contribution, by aid modality.

Modality	SDGs most frequently marked	SDGs for which significant contribution was measured (regression analysis)
Blending	SDG 8 (24%); SDG 7 (20%); SDG 6 (16%); SDG 9 (10%)	SDG 8 ; SDG 10; SDG 15; Global score
General Budget Support ⁶⁶	SDG 16 (70%); SDG 1 (10%); SDG 8 (8%); SDG 10 (4%)	SDG 2; SDG 8 ; SDG 10
Sector Budget Support	SDG 16 (65%); SDG 8 (9%); SDG 1 (8%); SDG 4 (5%)	SDG 16 ; SDG 17; Global score
Project	SDG 16 (28%); SDG 17 (13%); SDG 8 (9%); SDG 1 (8%)	SDG 5; SDG 8 ; SDG 9; SDG 15; SDG 16 ; Global score

Source: ADE own computations based on the EU Statistical Dashboard

Income and fragility levels of recipient countries also influenced the contribution of each euro spent. In middle- and higher-income countries, each euro spent increased the overall SDG score less than it did in low-income developing countries. This may be explained by the fact that middle- and higher-income countries start higher up on the SDG score indices. It is “easier” to move from a score of 50 to a score of 60 than from a score of 90 to a score of 100⁶⁷. Over time, lower-income

⁶⁴ Project-type interventions were also found to have a negative impact on SDG 6, however for this specific SDG the fragility level is found to be positively and significantly affecting progress, which points toward a modelling issue, possibly due to over-specification or to collinearity. Similarly, the negative relationship between funding of project-type intervention and SDG 11 progress can be related to modelling issue, as evidenced by the issue with the intercept value.

⁶⁵ The frequency of marking is measured as how often a specific SDG is marked in CRIS. A rescaling factor is then applied to correct for double counting from contracts marking more than one SDG, such that the sum of the frequencies is 100%.

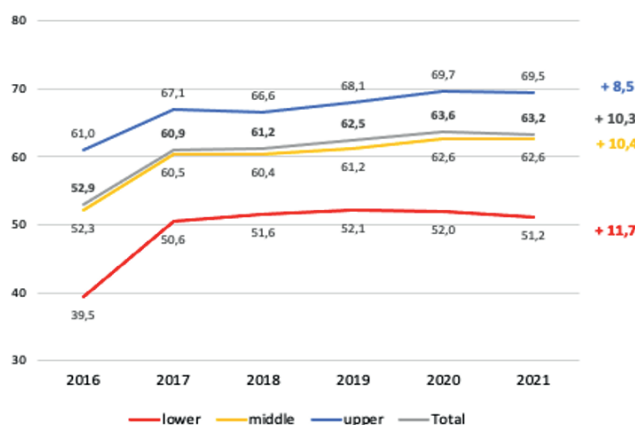
⁶⁶ For Budget Support (both general and sectoral), the distribution of SDGs Marked in CRIS does not entirely match with the information available in the Budget Support Database (which were manually entered). In the latter, the SDGs most often targeted were SDGs 8, 2, 4 and 16.

⁶⁷ Most developed countries haven't yet reached the highest possible score to given SDGs, but may be close. In DG NEAR regions, for instance, many countries have almost reached the maximal score for SDG 1 (No Poverty). In addition, for some SDGs, indicators use thresholds to determine the score. For instance, the child mortality rate (5 years) per 1000 births is one of the components of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being). A country receives the highest score if the rate is lower than 25 deaths per 1000 live births, the target defined by the UN. Thus, if a more developed country decreases the rate from 25 to 20 deaths, the score will remain the same. However, if a less developed country decreases the rate from 50 to 45, for example, their score for SDG 3 would improve.

developing countries have made more progress towards SDG achievement than middle- and upper-income countries. The difference between the groups of countries is the largest in 2016-2017 and has diminished since then, as shown on Figure 13 below.

Countries with a higher degree of fragility have on average scored lower on the SDG implementation indices, and each euro spent has contributed more. When looking at various geographies, the percentage of progress on an SDG per euro spent was always higher when the country started from a lower score. For example, in Latin America and Caribbean, SDG 10 (Reduces Inequalities) started much lower and progressed relatively more by euro spent.

Figure 13. Variation of SDG total score by income level group.



Source: ADE own computations based on the EU Statistical Dashboard

Notably, SDG marked interventions also varied by income level group of recipient countries, with some SDGs most frequently a focus in least developed countries, as opposed to others in more advanced developing countries. Instances of such variations are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Variation in main SDG marked by income level of recipient countries⁶⁸.

	Least developed countries	Lower middle-income countries	Upper middle-income countries	More advanced developing countries
SDG 1	14%	8%	3%	4%
SDG 8	5%	13%	9%	4%
SDG 17	7%	9%	17%	29%

Source: ADE own computations based on the Statistical Dashboard

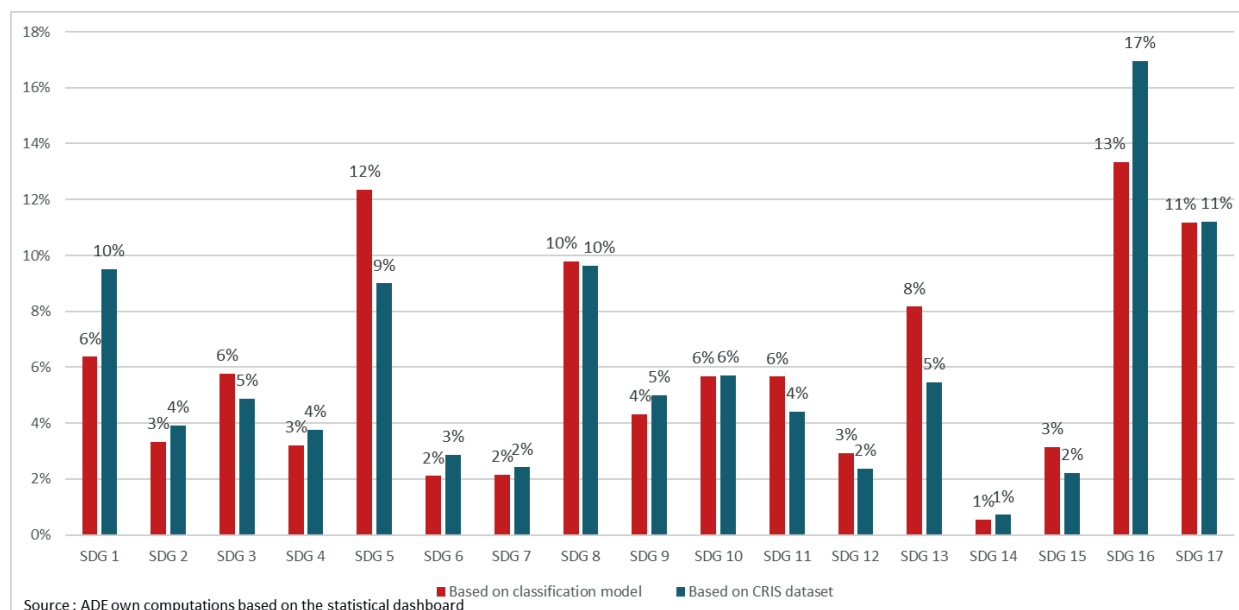
Marked funding also varied significantly between SDGs. First, while SDGs marked in individual actions were not systematically tracked at the beginning of the period, 98.3% of contracted financial flows could be associated with at least one SDG, as evidenced by the classification model⁶⁹. Case studies also confirmed that all actions could be linked to at least one SDG, and stakeholders in EU Delegations confirmed the overall alignment of all actions to the SDG framework. Second, while all SDGs were marked to some extent, there were variations in the frequency of marking per SDG, both in terms of number of contracts (as a share of the total number of contracts) and in terms of share

⁶⁸ More advanced developing countries (and territories) are countries which left the DAC list of ODA recipients in 2018.

⁶⁹ Contracts that could not be associated to a specific SDG mostly relate to funding of research projects, conferences... and are not country specific.

of funding. Based on marking in CRIS, **SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Growth), SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 5 (Gender equality) stand out in terms of the frequency with which they are marked by specific projects**, This aligns closely with the results of self-reporting by the EU Delegation in their External Assistance Monitoring Reports (EAMR) and the now discontinued Yearly Progress Reports (YPR). The classification model largely confirms this subset of most frequently marked SDGs, with some nuances. In particular, the classification model also includes SDG 13 (Climate Action) as one of the most frequently marked, but SDG 1 does not stand out anymore, as displayed in Figure 14 below.

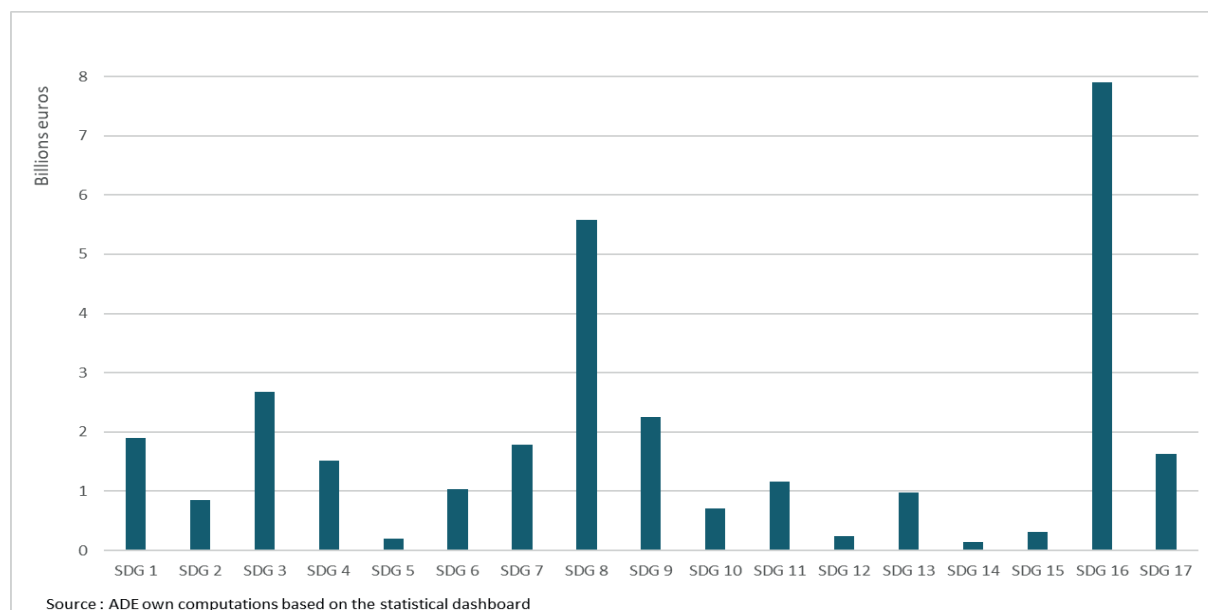
Figure 14. Frequency of SDG marking (% of contracts that mark a specific SDG)



This frequency of marking is only partially reflected in the volume of the funds allocation. As far as funding is concerned, SDGs 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) received significantly more directly marked funding (contracts that refer to the specific SDG as “main” SDG or as the only SDG marked)⁷⁰. Notably, SDG 5 (Gender Equality) attracted a very low amount of direct funds, in comparison with other SDGs but also compared to the frequency of marking. For budget support in particular, SDG 5 is one of the lowest (56%)⁷¹.

⁷⁰ This information only exists for a subset of 6083 contracts, out of a total of 26032.

⁷¹ Source: Budget Support Database.

Figure 15. Total amount marked directly to each SDG (in EUR)

An important limit on the identification of SDG contributions is the quality of the data available to reflect progress on SDGs, as monitored by UN agencies and country information. Data on in-country achievement of SDG indicators is often inadequate because of gaps and lacking political interest, as evidenced by Case Studies⁷². Overall, among survey respondents, 42% of EU stakeholders perceived national policies, strategies, and priorities to have a light or no alignment at all with the SDG framework.

The identification of contributions is also limited by the availability of SDG-coded Official Development Assistance (ODA) data. Indeed, major donors such as the USA, the UK and Germany do not report (or did not until recently in the case of Germany) their contribution by SDG. Less than half of the ODA disbursed worldwide is marked for SDGs, hampering the use of SDGs as the development assistance language, as confirmed by stakeholders in multiple OECD countries⁷³. In the case of the EU, the marking of DG ECHO activities has also been underestimated in official reporting⁷⁴. In addition, when SDG-coded data are available, they most often measure funding (intentions) and not results. Finally, each of the case studies revealed projects that contributed directly to one or more SDGs, but that contribution was not always reported as linked to SDGs (financial flows or other).

Non-spending activities: tools and processes, partnerships, and mainstreaming

Beyond funding interventions, the EU also aims to contribute to SDGs through non-spending activities, such as a relevant policy landscape, or efforts in coordination and coherence for development and resources (human and institutional) to support the mainstreaming of SDGs. These were the main inputs foreseen in the Theory of Change for external action, as pictured in Figure 16 below. These inputs materialised for instance through the New Consensus on Development (2017), the SDG Mapper, updated templates for Action Documents and, recently, an updated corporate result framework (the Global Europe Result Framework, GERF) which entered into force in 2023. Efforts

⁷² For example, in one country, the national statistical authority kept two separate data sets, including one set for external publication that kept the population constant instead of accounting for the actual population growth, thereby artificially improving its scores on SDG implementation. In other cases, a large informal sector does not allow to provide reliable data on indicators such as “fatalities at work” (one indicator of the score for SDG 8, Sustainable Economic Growth and Decent Jobs).

⁷³ OECD Reporting Case Study.

⁷⁴ Nexus Case Study.

related to Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) and coordination with Development Partners, including through Joint Programming and Team Europe have been less important. Within DG INTPA, these contributions were supported by a dedicated “SDG team” located in Unit D2 (Sustainable Development Policy and Partnership with UN & IFIs), in close collaboration with DG INTPA unit R2 (Planning, Budget and Reporting)⁷⁵. The SDG team located in DG INTPA also serves DG NEAR and FPI, though not in an official way. For example, revised action document templates and GERF are used by all EU external action stakeholders (next to the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) and Gender Action Plan (GAP III) result frameworks). DG INTPA also centralizes the reporting of contributions to SDGs to the OECD. Outside of DG INTPA, contributions to the SDG implementation are also supported by a small team at the Commission Secretariat-General.

The SDGs are integrated in strategies and programming; processes and tools were designed or adapted to identify contributions to SDGs and report financial flows. However, monitoring of the SDG progress is mostly absent, in part due to lacking result reporting and limited coordinated learning to make optimal use of systems in place. The systematic monitoring of the progress on SDGs was only recently started. Indeed, as of 2019, all actions are marked for at least one and up to 10 SDGs, all sectors, geographies, and modalities taken together. Regarding monitoring, while some interventions already identified relevant SDGs at indicator level in their logical framework, the systematic use of the GERF indicators linked to SDGs only started in January 2023. However, the GERF indicators, while associated to SDGs, represent only a fraction of core indicators, so that the majority of core indicators is not pre-linked to SDGs, making the SDGs invisible in the monitoring and reporting on results. Among the actions reviewed in the case studies, none had mechanisms in place to monitor progress on the SDG achievement. Also, when SDGs were strongly integrated, this was the result of individual initiatives to promote the framework and not of a coordinated effort. Overall, EU stakeholders often indicated that their SDG awareness pre-existed their involvement with EU external action⁷⁶ and they didn’t perceive that the EU attached a permanent and high importance to the SDGs. Moreover, more than half of the survey respondents estimated that the attention paid by the EU to the SDGs had decreased between 2016 and 2022⁷⁷. Some stakeholders interviewed talked about the SDGs as being a “wave that is over”⁷⁸. This contrasts with the deployment of multiple tools over the years, and it suggests a tendency to avoid imposing additional training and guidelines on operational managers in the field⁷⁹. In general, the stakeholders that were interviewed expressed a willingness to receive more practical training on good practices to identify and report SDGs⁸⁰.

⁷⁵ Stakeholders mentioned that DG INTPA unit D4 was also involved in the process.

⁷⁶ Particularly in countries that had adopted the MDGs.

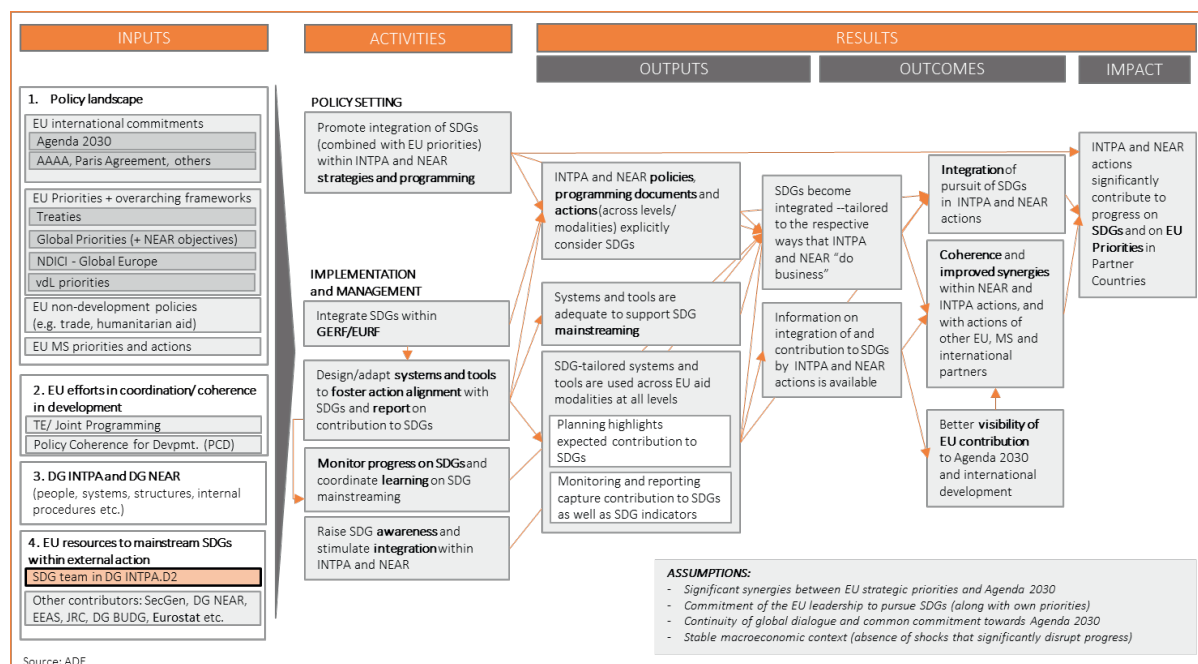
⁷⁷ The survey was conducted from end January to mid-February 2023, before publication of the EUVR and before the SDG summit.

⁷⁸ MN108

⁷⁹ MN301. Other stakeholders pointed to an issue of limited capacity for providing training to operational managers.

⁸⁰ MN106, MN108, MN111, MN112, MN 113, MN114, MN115, MN117.

Figure 16. Theory of Change



There is only limited information available on the contribution of DG INTPA and DG NEAR actions to SDG achievement, this hampers visibility. Combined with the limited awareness of the SDG framework among development partners, this has resulted in contributions that are not being considered to be a result of dialogue and coordination. Indeed, the SDG framework has been deemed by multiple stakeholders to be a “common language” for development. In its absence, the framework would not be used to improve coherence and synergy between the EU, its Member States (MS) and other international partners. While stakeholders largely perceive that the SDG framework adds value to EU’s support to partner countries, most do not make strategic use of it, as evidenced by case studies.

Contributions of the EU to SDG achievement are real even if marking is under-reported and driven by aid effectiveness in general. Under-reporting surfaces from the non-reporting in CRIS of SDGs that an action contributes to. Indeed, the classification model identified around twice as many SDGs as are marked in CRIS⁸¹, as detailed in Box 8 below. Strategic alignment to the SDG framework mostly pre-existed the mainstreaming efforts examined by this evaluation, as evidenced in EQ 1 and EQ 3. Activities implemented to support SDG mainstreaming have not changed the way the EU implements its external action, which was deemed to have always been aligned to the SDGs by most stakeholders interviewed as part of case studies. The main factors quoted to influence the EU contribution do not differ from the general principles of aid effectiveness, including the Busan Principles⁸². The activities put in place did contribute to a better reporting of financial contribution, in turn improving the visibility of the EU contribution to Agenda 2030, which supports the use of the SDGs as a development language⁸³. Also, there were missed opportunities to further use the SDG framework to improve the coherence and synergy with development partners. Finally, the evaluation also resulted in a caveat regarding the non-spending efforts related to the interlinkage approach (see the box below).

⁸¹ In 2016, contracts in CRIS marked an average of 1.6 SDG whereas the classification model identified an average of 3.5. Both figures grew over time, and in 2021, an average of 2.2 SDGs are identified in CRIS compared to 4.1 in the classification model.

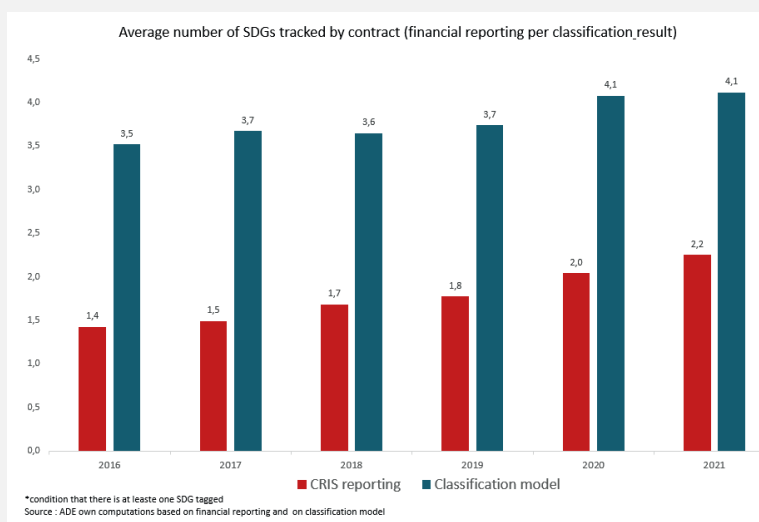
⁸² <https://www.oecd.org/development/effectiveness/busanpartnership.htm>

⁸³ MN 108, MN 111, MN 112, MN 205, MN 206, MN 207, MN 208.

Box 8. Interlinkages

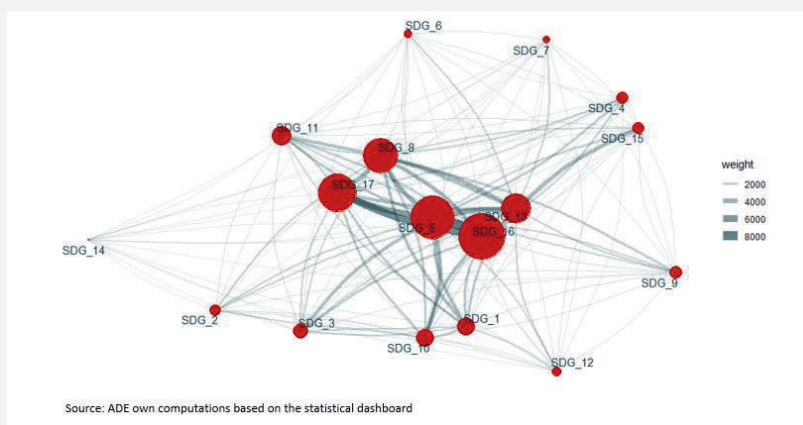
Interlinkages are a key concept of the Agenda 2030. Indeed, the Agenda intends to support a multi-dimensional approach to development. This has been materialised by the encouragement to pursue multiple SDGs together and by the requirement that projects do not harm any of the SDGs. Currently, however, more than half the contracts that are SDG-Marked reference only one single SDG, suggesting a low degree of interlinkages. This was confirmed by the perception of the EU stakeholders in the survey, with less half the respondents perceiving that SDGs benefitted from interlinkages. Among all contracts that were SDG-Marked, the average number of reported SDGs has increased from 1.4 in 2016 to 2.2 in 2021. However, the identification of SDGs through the classification model, revealed that contracts were on average related to between 3 and 4 SDGs. The number of SDGs identified by the classification model is also increasing for more recent contracts. This points to an improvement of interlinkages in EU-funded projects, even though these interlinkages are under-reported in the CRIS database.

Figure 17. Average number of SDGs marked, by contract (financial reporting in CRIS vs classification model)



Based on the set of SDGs identified through the classification model, a group of SDGs is central to the system: SDGs 16, 17, 8, 5, 13, and to a lesser extent, 11, are most often associated with other SDGs. These are indeed both the most common SDGs marked, and the cross-cutting issues (Gender, Environment, Governance) that were already previously tracked through the use of policy markers.

Figure 18. Mapping of interlinkages



Box 9 below summarizes succinctly a well-triangulated selection of *good practices and lessons to learn*, resulting from the above evaluation question (see definitions above for these terms).

Box 9. Good practice and lessons to learn for SDGs contributions.

GOOD PRACTICE	LESSONS TO LEARN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In some fields, thematic unit cross-check coherence in reporting contribution through various tools (SDG marker but also Rio markers, or Gender marker for instance). In some cases, the geographic coordinator has played an important role as well in ensuring coherence. • Some interventions reviewed linked core indicators to SDGs, making it easier to track progress on specific SDGs during implementation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Euros spent per capita on SDGs in low-income countries and fragile contexts were more positive, more influential than in higher income countries. • Data quality (SDG achievement and donors reporting to ODA) limit the chances of identifying SDG contributions. • Marking is prone to mistakes. A recent quality review of CRIS marking found that 20% of contracts were encoded in CRIS with information that is different from the one encoded in the Action Document. • A focus on SDGs as interlinked is lacking and there were missed opportunities to improve coherence and synergy. More consistent marking may help this. • The SDGs are perceived in the field as a visibility tool useful for high level talks and conferences, less so for civil society and the general public. • If SDG visibility is an objective going forward, it appears figures and data on amount spent on each goal were perceived to be informative when aggregated at the EU level but not at the country level. Stakeholders wondered what could/should be the return on investment for country-level financial marking.

3 CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

3.1 Overall assessment

The EU has made noteworthy, real, and positive contributions to SDGs since their inception in 2016 through 2022 – likely more than most donors. This has been done in part through laborious attention to tools, templates, and techniques to mainstream the SDG concept and language throughout the Commission, especially at the policy level. The contributions have also arisen organically given the overall alignment between EU priorities and Agenda 2030.

EU efforts have successfully increased familiarity and awareness of SDGs with a wide inclusive focus. There is strong awareness of SDGs at EU institutions with the most striking contributions at a high or central level, and to date less than desirable trickle-down effects to partner countries. The SDGs were seemingly never intended to directly inform intervention choice, design, and partnership.

The smaller influence of SDGs outside the central level is partially explained by limited EU resources (time, human and financial) --dedicated to promoting SDGs. EU capacity is also limited in assessing and capitalizing on marked SDG financial flows (no evidence suggests that the SDG financial marking led to decision making) and linking those intentions to SDG target achievement (for which quality national data are often lacking).

There is no updated and downscaled EU position on how EU personnel ‘on the front line’ should ‘do’ SDGs. At least partially due to its small size and budget, the SDG team is reportedly unable to regularly connect with field staff and intricately understand how EU Delegations’ needs relating to SDGs evolve and/or what opportunities exist. While there is no evidence to precisely establish the weight of human resource constraints on decisions made relating to SDG priorities, it is plausible that there is an effect (e.g., many tools are seen as academic, less practical for and poorly known by EU Delegations). Generally, staff limitations inside the SDG team incur challenges to fill identified gaps.

Other dynamics such as aid effectiveness are also driving SDG progress and support. Importantly, there is a sentiment among EU staff that interest in the SDGs is generally waning over the past few years and that even greater effort may be required to counteract this⁸⁴. In addition, the downgrading of the SDG team from a designated unit to a team is indirectly interpreted by some actors as a signal that SDGs are no longer a top priority of DG INTPA. While many SDG-related tools are strong, some are insufficient and fraught with challenges. EU has inconsistently used their power of influencing to promote SDGs. SDG progress remains necessarily a joint challenge of the EU, partner countries and the global community. Success requires SDGs to be pursued actively by all. The EU appears to have decided against taking a more active protagonist role to influence operating partners outside the EU in embedding SDGs in their operations. This is different from the more active technical ‘niche’ role the EU has played at the global level (e.g., DG INTPA actively lobbies the OECD DAC WP on statistics etc.), one which is much less visible to the public. As a leading global player, however, more active EU aggregation of Member States’ efforts to advance SDG contributions may have offered exponential value to avoid losing traction among wildly competing global priorities.

⁸⁴ Efforts made towards the EUVR and SDG summit may present opportunities to further engage on SDGs, but these occurred after the evaluation work was completed and constitute one way forward.

3.2 Conclusions

A set of eight conclusions is derived from the findings of this evaluation.

C1 EU contributions to SDGs are real, positive, and often significant

The evaluation shows that EU has made real, positive, and often significant contributions to SDGs. These contributions come in many forms, shapes and sizes and are found in every region. As portrayed in the findings above, SDG contributions (achievement and/or support) are described in every annual report and Voluntary National Reviews (VNR). EU contributions to SDGs are catalysed when staff apply the processes and tools studied (nine, in this evaluation) and generally, by EU mainstreaming efforts. The contributions differ by SDGs (where SDGs 8, 9 and 11 surfaced as strongest), by aid modality, and by income and fragility of recipient countries.

The most influential factors driving EU contribution to progress on SDG targets are the aid effectiveness principles that have been known to the development community since before the emergence of Agenda 2030. The most influential independent factors informing SDG achievement were GDP per capita and trade openness on the positive side, and population density on the negative side.

Specific EU contributions cannot be directly attributed to SDG achievement owing to limited reliable data (progress on targets) by reporting countries. At EU level, the tools that were operated over the 2016-2022 period did not allow either to track progress made during implementation i.e., monitoring and reporting stages of actions. There are high hopes that the GERF tool and all core indicators available in result chains will substantially improve the linking of results to SDGs (and eventually also the financial flows).

There is also a solid case for EU contributions made by entities entirely outside the realm of DG INTPA, DG NEAR and the nine tools examined in this evaluation. For example, while never using templates, nor being marked using the CRIS SDG Marker or benefitting from specific SDG-related training, DG ECHO is seen by a Case Study in this evaluation (i.e., Nexus) as well as by the TOSSD process, as regularly contributing to SDGs. What this mismatch indicates is that EU faces ongoing challenges to track what is being done and the value of EU contributions to SDGs.

This conclusion is based mainly on EQ4 triangulated with all EQs

C2 EU tools and mainstreaming have made SDGs visible through much of the portfolio, with particular attention at the central and policy levels

Visibility of SDGs within EU's portfolio of external action has been strongly promoted by the application of EU tools examined in this evaluation, i.e., via mainstreaming and awareness-building. Awareness has been built above all for EU staff (in DG INTPA and DG NEAR delegations and headquarters), but less so for implementation partners, partner countries and EU Member States. While starting prior to the scope of this evaluation (i.e., MDGs) and despite many parallel drivers, this awareness has been spurred on in no small way by DG INTPA's strategic decision to promote SDGs and the tools they have developed to do so. The decision to make some tools (such as the SDG marker in Action Documents and in CRIS) compulsory, both for DG INTPA and DG NEAR, has made a difference in the degree of visibility achieved.

References to SDGs are a common feature starting with central policy documents, and proof of mainstreaming is embodied by the frequent references by EU stakeholders to SDGs as

“programmed in our DNA” or “our main alphabet”. Mainstreaming at higher level (including vdl letters and speech) has led to appropriation of SDGs as a symbolic framework for all EU action.

The EU priorities (the current institutional von der Leyen ones and those by the external action DGs) are strongly aligned to SDGs, which helps spur on progress. There are also strong ongoing dynamics that have inevitably played a parallel role in forging EU contributions to SDGs—such as the MDGs and aid effectiveness strategies that predate the evaluation scope (before the launch of Agenda 2030). In addition, SDG mainstreaming has benefitted from some important policy initiatives (e.g., new Consensus, first EURV, etc.)

By many, SDGs are seen as a ‘headquarters’ thing’ –important for visibility, high-level policy discussions and fund raising. SDGs clearly lose their verve in most cases, as one moves from EU hallways to EU Member States (where no active EU support for SDGs was found) and EU Delegations, and even more for implementing partners and aid recipients. There are exceptions, such as growing implementation of Integrated National Financing Frameworks (INFFs) but they are far from universal (and not always closely linked to EU activity).

Many voices at operational level suggest that mainstreaming at central and policy levels is sufficient, ensuring alignment without need for greater effort. Mainstreaming as a process has thus been a reality at central but not at decentralised level and tool use is seen to be more the result of compliance than integration. In the absence of adequate capacity to interact with EU Delegations, the scope for meaningful operational guidance is limited.

This conclusion is based mainly on EQ1 and EQ3

C3 While not systematically feasible or realistic, SDGs do not explicitly nor directly inform the strategic choice nor the design of EU interventions

Despite being “part of EU DNA” (C2 above), SDGs are not used strategically to inform the choice or design of EU interventions (with very few exceptions). Nor is this influence of SDGs intended or expected (i.e., programme design and selection are driven by largely separate processes). There was never a case found by the evaluation team to support an SDG gap explicitly driving the choice or design of an intervention, nor the object of a meeting at country-level. Needs assessments are routinely discussed with national partners with little if any regard to SDG achievement or current level of financial flows marked to them.

Along the intervention cycle, SDGs are marked at the end of the design stage, during the finalisation of the Action Documents, and disappear almost immediately after, with little visibility in monitoring and reporting. There are strong expectations that this will change with the GERF and a broad set of core indicators available in OPSYS (i.e., explicit reporting on SDGs) that started being implemented in 2023.

A few stakeholders mentioned that they find it excessive to expect that SDGs would drive design or selection of EU external action. Nevertheless, something so important to merit a global thematic evaluation (i.e., SDGs) was assumed--going into the evaluation-- to also drive external action design and collaboration in meaningful and perhaps measurable ways beyond the central policy level.

This conclusion is based on EQ1, EQ3 and EQ4

C4 The potential to use the SDG framework to inform partnerships has not been fully exploited.

Partnerships are mostly driven by the convergence of respective interests. If SDGs are indeed the common language of external action, it should be straightforward that such interests be expressed in SDG terms; however, in practice the use of the SDG language in the context of collaboration with partners is limited. While the EU has been leading by example regarding the use of such language, this has not been sufficient to make it universal, nor to meaningfully “imprint” the design and operation of partnerships.

In fact, while high level partnership reports (at the central as well as, at times, country level, e.g., Joint Partnership Documents) make explicit links to one or more SDGs, SDGs are reportedly not central to the operational dialogue between the EU and other donors (i.e., regarding specific interventions, design and implementation, and reporting.)

The EU Consensus for Development and the NDICI-Global Europe frame collaboration with EU Member States (MS) around SDGs. However, in practice the use of SDGs in dialogue with MS at the in-country level varies depending on each MS’s familiarity with them. Opportunities were missed for the SDG framework to be more actively considered while defining shared priorities, or as a reference to assess needs and SDG progress; albeit often the EU successfully encouraged a more significant use of the SDG framework. Recent formally structured Joint Programming Documents reference SDGs, underscoring that they are included in higher level discussion. Similarly, while SDGs were not significantly discussed as part of the planning of Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs), TEI infosheets always include a mention of SDGs—an association that appears to be made at EU headquarters.

National governments can be influenced or encouraged to support SDGs more actively in general, or even to support specific SDGs identified through a joint and balanced needs assessment aligned to the national priorities or current SDG achievement. The UN is conducting efforts in this sense, but is also seen to look to EU Delegations to play an influencing support role. Although this happens to some extent, in most cases the delegations consider that the responsibility for this process should remain within the UN. Indeed, very few specific efforts were found where an EU Delegation made SDGs an explicit or implicit agenda item in their ongoing dialogues or exchanges with national government partners.

This conclusion is based on EQ2 and EQ3

C5 There is no clear ‘EU’ position (notably for the EU Delegation level) on how to “do” – or do better – SDGs

The SDGs are – for some goals more than others - a broad concept that is challenging to operationalize and that requires adaption to each context. SDGs are not a “one size fits all”. However, beyond the 2020 Staff Working Document on SDGs (which focuses on marking financial flows and policy), no precise guidance on their operationalisation was found. What *should be* done to promote SDGs, what is expected?

While the SDGs are “nothing less than a blueprint for a better world” (Doug Frantz, Deputy Secretary General, OECD), there is no EU blueprint for good practice in promoting SDGs. The Staff Working Document on SDGs highlighted well SDG marking in Action Documents (AD) and policy coherence. But: when should EU actors use SDGs--beyond simple mention in AD templates or routine marking of financial flows in CRIS/TOSSD? What makes the use of SDGs meaningful at the level of an EU Delegation? What is the minimum use of SDGs or how far is too much? What are

the techniques or options an EU Delegation can deploy to promote SDGs more effectively? This has not simplified greater use of the framework to contribute to SDG achievement.

The evaluation found many tools and processes in place, often laudable even if not consistently enough with the risk that the efforts lead to anecdotal – and not systematic – impacts. Some of them benefit from annual training sessions and energetic coaching. The team, however, did not identify a concise position paper on “How the EU ‘does’ SDGs”. We are not referring here to what SDGs have attracted EU investment, by whom, or with what results. The policy papers and the first EUVR (2023) provide useful examples of what has been done.

The evaluation has identified a difficulty that relates to capacity constraints of the overstretched SDG team, which has been reduced in last few years. Without wanting to add laborious tasks to already busy schedules of EU personnel, the lack of clear expectation and strategy to lay down the purpose of mainstreaming puts the onus on the already overloaded and poorly resourced units in DG INTPA tasked to mark financial flows (including TOSSD) or manage the GEF reporting. It is not entirely clear how, by whom and toward which specific purposes SDGs and each different instrument should be used. EU operational staff lacks the global picture of what will result of their marking, creating the risk of it remaining a tick-the-box exercise.

This conclusion is based on EQ1, EQ2, EQ3 and EQ4

C6 There is a growing risk of SDGs being forgotten or side-tracked

There is some sign of “mainstreaming fatigue” and loss of interest concerning SDGs (both within the EU and globally). EU efforts, as substantial as they are, remain insufficient to sustain the momentum needed to achieve SDGs. Voices consulted express concern that despite EU’s work studied across all four evaluation questions, SDGs are gradually losing interest inside EU and attention outside, among partner countries. More than seven years have passed since establishing one of the world’s widest cross-cutting charters. With other dynamics trending high, there are competing priorities and rapidly dwindling resources. While SDGs are seen by some voices to “be part of the EU fabric”, others suggest the SDG threads are rapidly unravelling, and require renewed energy to keep the cloth together.

It is noteworthy that since the present evaluation time frame, the EUVR and the SDG Summit received clear commitments from the College to actively integrate SDGs in the Global Gateway. These movements are expected to reactivate or invigorate SDG dynamics.

This conclusion is based on EQ1, EQ2, EQ3 and EQ4

C7 While strong, many SDG-related tools are insufficient as they stand today and/or are not applied consistently enough to enhance contributions

Nine tools were examined in this evaluation and many of them are well known, well integrated and readily applied across many levels inside the EU (DG INTPA, DG NEAR and EEAS/EU Delegations). There remain a few that are perceived to be less than ideally applied across levels or regions. Because DG INTPA aims to be a learning organisation, a few tools have been introduced in the later part of the evaluation period explicitly to enhance earlier gaps, such as the TOSSD to tag financial flows across all 30 DGs or the GEF to report annually on contributions. Some of the most important examples of gaps found are summarised succinctly below (greater detail is in the Findings chapter), all related at least somewhat to capacity limitations:

SDG Marker: this tool benefits from limited explicit guidance, only light quality assurance and it carries inherent biases of the individual tasked to tag EU interventions. There are some inconsistencies and errors in the reporting that merit attention. While the SDG team has strived to support the conversion of CRS codes to SDGs informed by guidance fashioned on OECD Handbook, there remain indications that actions are contributing to more SDGs than reported.

Do No Harm: while assessing harm between SDGs is an explicit directive from OECD, there is no EU mechanism set up to check on how achieving one SDG may influence achievement of another (beyond assumptions). If looked at jointly with SDGs, markers introduced by the Commission in relation to specific topics (such as environment, climate mitigation, gender, and inequality) provide information in this sense limited to those topics; but the assessment is not systematic.

Linkages: the examination of links between SDGs is lacking a strategic approach and has not been developed further to inform efforts pre-existing the SDG framework (such as the Humanitarian-Development (and Peace) Nexus, and environment and gender mainstreaming). The requirement to identify a “main” SDG was introduced at the end of 2019 to support easier reporting of interlinkages. The identification of a “main” SDG indeed makes the analysis of interlinkages easier as it does not require more complex techniques, such as network analysis, and produces easy-to-interpret results. Better policy recommendations on interlinkages are expected to be produced as a result. As the first analyses were still very recent at the time of the evaluation, no better policy recommendations have been made yet. In parallel, there is a risk that, at first sight, this new reporting feature undermines the Agenda 2030’s requirement of deeply rooted interlinkages.

This conclusion is based mainly on EQ1 and EQ3

C8. EU played a key champion role for SDGs, keeping them high on the agenda of the international community

The EU is often seen as playing a role that exceeds that of many other organisations. EU was a key negotiator for their establishment and often one of the few actors still perceived by informants to fight for SDG promotion and mainstreaming. The EU is the largest donor reporting its ODA with SDG tags. With an increase in competing global priorities and dwindling resources, it has been critical for at least one major entity to hold the torch for SDGs.

Some actors such as UN mandated organisations reportedly are at times reminded by central-level EU entities to keep SDGs high on their lists (versus being overcome by competing priorities). Efforts on the 2023 EU Voluntary Review and reporting to OECD and the Global Gateway may foster further positive contributions (these were beyond current evaluation scope). EU’s marking of financial flows (in CRIS or more recently across all 30 DGs with TOSSD) could serve as a model for other reporting donors, including EU Member States. EU has been instrumental to develop tools that could serve to help many actors clarify the SDG scope of their work (e.g., JRC SDG Mapper) and which aim to go beyond financial flows to track contributions (e.g., via the Global Europe Results Framework). No other large donor was found to rival this level of active EU SDG-related effort.

This conclusion is based on EQ1, EQ3 and EQ4

3.3 Lessons to learn

Following are three lessons that emerged from this evaluation that are relevant beyond its immediate scope.

Lesson #1: An inherent danger of mainstreaming any theme is the risk of losing sight of it

In parallel to Conclusion 8 above, mainstreaming carried benefits as described in this evaluation, but at the same time always presents a risk. A scholar notes that “the danger of mainstreaming is that it gets shoved under a carpet until an official [or an evaluator] comes along and finds it” (Sanders, 2023). If the role of mainstreaming is to “provide a mechanism for a more “programmatically” approach to implementing” SDG obligations, “there is a danger that [such...] a compliance approach [can be] seen as offering an alternative” —instead of an additional—method (McCrudden, 2014). Numerous tools examined in this evaluation are important verifying/checking or compliance exercises. They keep the SDGs visible and enable reporting on them in high-level documents (to avoid what happened to the MDGs in many contexts). The SDG Marker and TOSSD provide clear tracers for financial flows. Use of these outputs is particularly prominent at the central/HQ level but much less so at country level (EU Delegations). It is simple for EU Delegations to say “SDGs are part of our alphabet” but much harder to trace how SDGs have genuinely made a difference at that level. DG INTPA (notably unit D2 in charge of Sustainable Development Policy and Global Partnerships with UN) has been instrumental in mainstreaming the SDGs across the EU. As long as there is the perception of the theme—or excitement for it—fading over the years since its 2015 inception, it would be dangerous to assume that this unit’s work is done. The recent efforts (after the evaluation period) on the adoption of the EUVR and the SDG Summit are promising signs of continued support leading to SDG integration in the Global Gateway.

Lesson #2: Financial flows are not synonymous with contributions or results

In step with Lesson #1 above, financial flow tracking is an important first step but cannot be misconstrued with EU contributions nor SDG results (country-level goals and indicators). The GERF has been developed in part to trace EU contributions to SDGs and this will need to be directly compared to the financial flows (if not planned). Eventually the TOSSD, GERF (and all other core indicators) and nationally reported SDG results will need to be examined together, to methodologically assess the precise contribution. Such a comparison between the SDG Marker (CRIS only) and SDG Results by country was conducted for the desk phase of this evaluation, with useful albeit partial results that confirmed positive relationships. While continuing to improve financial flow tracking, it will be important to sustain an equal focus on contributions and results and establish clear connections between all core indicators and SDGs.

Lesson #3: Advances at the central level takes time and resources to trickle down

This lesson emanates from Conclusion 5 above, underscoring the strong advances in SDGs made at central level. For multiple dynamics, including mainstreaming and awareness building more generally, it is easy to get distracted by the energy and discourse emanating from the central/HQ level. The same is true for SDGs. It is a truism that trickling down to lower levels takes time, but meaningful mainstreaming of SDGs at the level of national partners through EU Delegation support has only just begun in most contexts. It may require more human and financial resources beyond one DG INTPA unit—sharing the role more widely with clearly articulated scripts that describe what needs to be done to harmonise the approach and increase the reach.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation R1: Continue to strengthen and develop tools to mainstream/advance the EU position on SDGs

While many tools are already instrumental, reinforce other existing tools and mainstreaming processes to further advance SDGs, notably among EU Delegations.

This recommendation is linked to conclusions C5, C10 and C13

Main implementation responsibility: DG INTPA (impetus: D2)

Main associated actors: multiple, tool-dependant

What worked and should continue? DG INTPA has proven to apply learning, continuously tweaking and calibrating SDG tools and systems to improve outputs and outcomes. One proof of this is in the launching of the new TOSSD and the GERF.

What should be strengthened and how should this be done? Continued improvements should be explored and implemented for various tools such as those below:

Sub-recommendations, underpinned by requisite human and financial resources:

R1.1 Marker and TOSSD: prepare/enhance and disseminate explicit guidance on the marking (main and significant) techniques; add quality assurance or validation and/or consider ways to integrate tools to enhance marking such as SDG Mapper, perhaps inspired by the TOSSD process; consider the need to harmonise CRIS and TOSSD marking (currently TOSSD applies the technique on all DGs except INTPA). Look for ways to streamline the marking systems to eliminate current duplication. Share CRIS and TOSSD results to EU Delegations at regular intervals so they can see how their efforts are reflected at the central levels and be incentivized to report and/or use the SDG tools more effectively.

R1.2 Do No Harm: explore how to add mitigation checks at the level of AD and/or as part of the SDG Marking (or TOSSD) process to routinely confirm for each intervention that no unintentional harm will be produced between SDGs. Integrate SDG dimensions into existing processes underway within technical facilities (e.g., environment, climate, and gender). Examples to explore as models for this from other domains include the African Development Bank's Environment and Social Management Plan (ESMP) or the Swiss Government's one-hour checklist/filter called Climate, Environment and Disaster Risk Reduction Integration Guidance (CEDRIG-light).

R1.3 Interlinkages: invest in an exploration of how to portray and promote interlinkages of SDGs with an aim to identify synergies and economies of scale. This should build on analytical findings emerging from the November 2022 Annual DG Report and EUVR.

R1.4 GERF: capitalize on existing reporting emanating soon from the GERF processes to confirm EU contributions. Look for explicit ways to compare the GERF results and all core indicators to the SDG Marking or TOSSD trends to explore contributions more carefully.

For all tools, further strengthen and disseminate them notably among EU Delegations, generating mechanisms to obtain feedback from users and continue to adapt them to make them incentivising, pertinent and meaningful.

Recommendation R2: Increase EU influencing with development actors

Given the waning interest in SDGs over time, and the lag in SDG mainstreaming to reach EU Delegations in a more meaningful way, EU Delegations should be encouraged to capitalise on their influencing role to promote SDGs in line with national priorities and jointly assessed needs.

This recommendation is linked to conclusions C5, C9 and C10

Main implementation responsibility: EU Delegations/EEAS, DG INTPA, DG NEAR
Main associated actors: donors, UN, OECD

What worked and should continue? EU Delegations have established themselves across the globe as instrumental influencers to national governments and implementing partners for many key priorities and dynamics. This influencing ‘power’ and skill can lend itself well to further enhance SDG results and numerous actors are asking for this support.

What should be strengthened and how should this be done? EU Delegations should be enabled to play a more active or explicit role in promoting SDGs. This could be through clearer positions communicated from central INTPA/NEAR level to EU delegations (see Recommendation R3) suggesting a set of options aligned to the Global Gateway as ways to assess, communicate and advocate for attention to priority SDGs in line with national priorities, and supported by the EUVR results.

Consider playing a stronger/ more leadership-oriented role to promote SDG mainstreaming by other actors. Since Agenda 2030 is largely coherent with the EU agenda, more substantial value can probably come by aligning with other actors in Global Gateway contexts (UN, IFIs, etc.).

Sub-recommendations:

R2.1 Develop a common cross-DG vision with additional support to the United Nations (especially in collaboration with the Integrated National Financing Framework-INFF). Continue to support INFFs and other UN efforts to mainstream SDGs within local governments. Informed by the College in EUVR, SDGs should be mainstreamed across the Global Gateway as a new opportunity.

R2.2 To gain SDG traction at the Delegation level, also collaborate with donors and OECD more strategically. Further promote the use of SDGs in donor fora (MS and wider) by fostering the use of new national and other data available (e.g., from INFFs). Collaborate with OECD to harmonise, improve, and update standards for tracking of ODA by SDG. Invest in national government statistics systems to report on SDG achievement, linked also to GERF and core indicator progress (above).

Recommendation R3: Establish a more detailed, updated and downscaled position and related guidance on how EU Delegations should or can ‘do’ SDGs better

The EU should establish a more detailed updated and downscaled position on how to implement SDGs at EU Delegation level.

This recommendation is linked to conclusions C1, C5, C6 and C8

Main implementation responsibility: DG INTPA (drafting by D2)
Main associated actors: EEAS, key EU Delegations to pilot/validate (via inter-DG consultations)

What worked and should continue? As per conclusions above, EU has made itself known as a champion for SDGs and has made important contributions to SDGs at central and policy levels. A Staff Working Document (SWD) issued in 2020 maps the whole of government approach to

promoting SDGs at central and policy level. Since 2015, DG INTPA has strongly promoted the mainstreaming of SDGs through numerous tactics, many very successful and promising, including the EURV orientations to ensure SDG integration in the Global Gateway. They should continue along this path as a lot of work remains.

What should be strengthened and how should this be done? The high-level SDG progress (and the 2020 SWD) fell short of influencing/clarifying what could or should be done by each EU Delegation to promote SDGs at their level. In a short document (or series of 2-page briefs) developed from the ‘bottom-up’, each step of the EU SDG journey should be mapped in simple terms with optional and/or expected/required actions for EEAS/EU Delegation staff. This will require the identification of adequate human and financial resources. While maintaining the ongoing central level processes, the EU should articulate options for, *inter alia*:

- Where to find detailed guidance or how to access SDG-related training, or support.
- How to best use the EU ‘influencing’ power: whether and how to define key SDG priorities in a given country/context and notably within Global Gateway flagships (in a more meaningful way than TEI flagships); whether and how to confirm the appropriate inclusion of, or introduce missing, SDGs into dialogues with governments; how and when to translate locally assessed needs and national priorities into SDGs (see also Recommendation R2).
- How to harness the energy of multiple DGs to promote SDGs using a nexus approach: how to account for same-country contributions from DG ECHO and others.
- Whether and how to encourage EU Member States and implementing partners (especially UN and WB) to contribute generally or to specific SDGs, integrating them in Global Gateway contexts and Team Europe approaches; how to select and nurture partnerships to reflect SDG priorities.
- At SDG Marking stage, how to assign SDG markers to interventions with little to no explicit mention of specific SDGs; how to establish a main versus a significant marker; how to determine the number of markers to assign; how to compare/contrast and navigate CRIS and TOSSD marking; how to quality-assure the CRIS marking; how to compare marked financial flows with EU MS or other donors.
- At the country level, how to support projects aiming to strengthen local statistics institutes to improve SDG indicator reporting, linked as possible to the Global Gateway. Thereafter, how to incorporate and capitalize on SDG achievement data as it becomes available (better statistics, INFF data, collaboration fora).
- What could be done at HQ level to better serve EU Delegations in implementing SDGs? Which tools are needed? What are the delegations’ needs?

The outcome may be an updated and downscaled SWD.

Sub-recommendations, all requiring adequate human and financial resources:

R3.1 Clarify more specifically the operational EU positions with regard to its objectives in terms of contribution to SDGs. Refine the Theory of Change proposed in this evaluation to reflect the precise positions and the contributions desired by EU outside the central/policy level or financial marking. Through the Theory of Change, establish a short guidance document containing the elements above.

R3.2 Disseminate the Theory of Change and the guidance as a useful blueprint to all DGs, EU Delegations and pertinent partners. Make it useful and create incentives to apply it, but do not make it mandatory.

R3.3 Capitalize on the Humanitarian Development and Peace nexus movement inside EU and partners to establish which SDGs are most appropriate for explicitly scripted handovers of funded interventions from one DG to another (e.g., humanitarian action to sustainable development). This would most likely include DG ECHO and DGs INTPA and NEAR. The SDG Markers and TOSSD could be datamined more carefully to identify which SDGs would be priority candidates.

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