



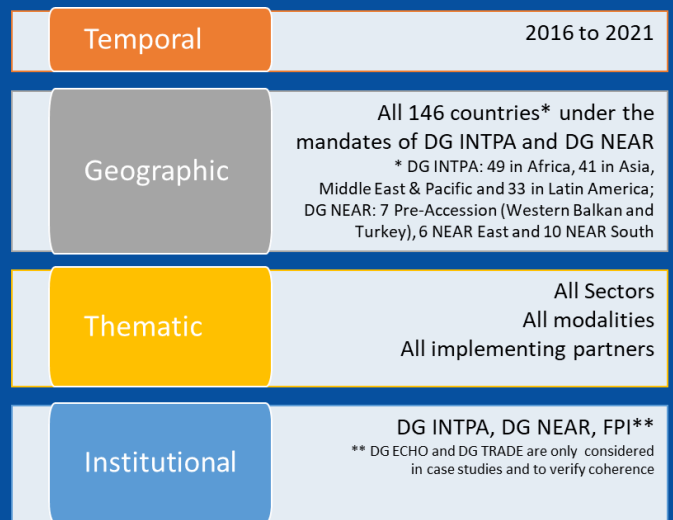
# Evaluation of the Contribution to the Implementation of SDGs by EU External Action in the period 2016-2021

## Background

Established by the 2030 Agenda and adopted in 2015 at a special United Nations (UN) Summit, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are one of the world’s only actionable frameworks shared by all UN Member States. The SDGs are a collection of seventeen interlinked objectives designed to serve as a "shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet." Actively involved in SDG negotiations and striving to integrate them into external action and development policies, the European Union (EU) commissioned this global strategic and process-focused evaluation to examine the breadth, depth, and consistency of their SDG contribution.

## Objectives and scope

Focused on the period from 2016 to 2021, this evaluation was tasked to examine contributions to SDGs made by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) and the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). Four 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. It also sought to identify good practice and lessons to learn to inform EU external action and partners efforts in pursuit of SDG progress.



Source: ADE

## Methodological Approach

This strategic process-focused study went beyond a classic evaluation of EU support. It had a strong quantitative, technical, and exploratory nature. Techniques included process and stakeholder analysis (leading to an SDG Theory of Change), Common RELEX Information System (CRIS data marking analysis to produce a classification model trained to fill 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 helped to produce the evidence base. 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 also applied.

The evaluation was monitored by a Reference Group consisting of members of EU services (gathering representatives of several Commission DGs; of the European External Actions Services, and of the Joint Research Center).



# Evaluation of the Contribution to the Implementation of SDGs by EU External Action in the period 2016-2021

## Key Findings and Conclusions

A small tight team inside DG INTPA developed, refined or promoted useful processes to advance SDGs. To evaluate the EU contribution to SDGs, nine specific tools and processes were examined. Aligned to EU Programming stages, 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 use of these tools was gradually reduced to a handful of staff at least partially concentrated on SDGs. Despite this relatively small team, EU

**DESIGN**  
Identification, formulation  
[5 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)

**IMPLEMENTATION**  
Monitoring  
[2 tools]

1. Yearly Progress Reports (YPR, formerly EAMR)
2. Strategic Steering Committee (SSC)/Quality Review Meeting (QRM) updates

**RESULTS**  
[2 tools]

1. Annual reports on implementation of the EU’s external action instruments (DG level)
2. Global Europe Results Framework (GERF) and previous EURF

processes and tools have proven useful to make SDG visible across the institution and to provide a valuable model to donor partners for financial flow marking. The SDG Marker 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.

**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.

**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 with a relatively low degree of SDG mainstreaming in partnerships and coordination effort, led to varying levels of SDG integration.

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



## Evaluation of the Contribution to the Implementation of SDGs by EU External Action in the period 2016-2021

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. Table 1 portrays the financial flows marked to SDGs comparing them to the SDGs proven by the regression to be significant for EU contributions. While the EU has allocated substantial funding intended to contribute to specific SDGs, interlinkages between them are less clear: more than half of all contracts referenced only a single SDG.

**Table 1. 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	<b>SDG 8</b> (24%); SDG 7 (20%); SDG 6 (16%); SDG 9 (10%)	<b>SDG 8</b> ; SDG 10; SDG 15; Global score
General Budget Support <sup>1</sup>	SDG 16 (70%); SDG 1 (10%); <b>SDG 8</b> (8%); <b>SDG 10</b> (4%)	SDG 2; <b>SDG 8</b> ; <b>SDG 10</b>
Sector Budget Support	<b>SDG 16</b> (65%); SDG 8 (9%); SDG 1 (8%); SDG 4 (5%)	<b>SDG 16</b> ; SDG 17; Global score
Project	<b>SDG 16</b> (28%); SDG 17 (13%); <b>SDG 8</b> (9%); SDG 1 (8%)	SDG 5; <b>SDG 8</b> ; SDG 9; SDG 15; <b>SDG 16</b> ; Global score

Source: ADE computations based on the EU Statistical Dashboard

Overall, **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 SDGs are not fully articulated in the monitoring and indicator system.

<sup>1</sup> 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.



## Evaluation of the Contribution to the Implementation of SDGs by EU External Action in the period 2016-2021

### 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 **three overarching and specific recommendations** are proposed below.

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.