Evaluation of the European Union's External Action
RESPONSE OF THE EU SERVICES TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS

Evaluation title	Evaluation of the Contribution to the Implementation of SDGs by the EU External Action (2016-2021)		
Lead EU Service	Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), Unit D2 - Sustainable Development Policy & Global Partnership with UN Evaluation managed by DG INTPA, Unit D4	**Geographical scope**	All 146 countries under the mandate of DG INTPA and DG NEAR
Associated EU Services	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood & Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) Secretariat-General of the European Commission (SG) European External Action Service (EEAS) Joint Research Centre (JRC)	**Main purposes of the evaluation**	• To examine to what extent and how efficiently DG INTPA and DG NEAR managed to achieve the integration of the SDGs in the EU external action ("PROCESS" dimension) • To assess to what extent the EU external actions implemented by DG INTPA and DG NEAR contributed to the achievement of SDGs and what internal and external factors enhanced or hindered this contribution ("RESULTS" dimension)
Evaluation budget	EUR 395,831	**Contractor**	Aide à la Décision Économique, s.a.
Date of approval of final report	December 2023	**Publications**	[Strategic Evaluation Reports - European Commission (europa.eu)](https://europa.eu)
Additional information	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.		

Recommendations from the independent evaluation	Response of the EU services
Continue to strengthen and develop tools to mainstream/advance the EU position on SDGs *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: "R1. 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 GERF to confirm intended SDG contributions. This can be also done by associating EU core indicators closely to SDGs, thereby filling a current gap".* While many tools are already instrumental, reinforce other existing tools and mainstreaming processes to further advance SDGs, notably among EU Delegations. 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. **R1.1** SDG Marker and Total Official Support for Sustainable Development (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 CRS 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 CRS 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	**Accepted** This recommendation is accepted as it is in line with the focus of the EU to further strengthen tools to mainstream and advance SDGs in EU external action as reflected in the EU Voluntary Review on progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (hereinafter 'EUVR') and as well as efforts and developments undertaken in recent years. The recommendations are read in conjunction with the evaluation's Executive Summary, which was elaborated as final deliverable of the evaluation process and reflects the latest update from the evaluators. In this case, the Executive Summary points out, EU processes and tools have proven useful to make SDGs visible across the institution. The 2023 EUVR highlighted the usefulness of various tools in SDG reporting. For example, the wide application of using SDG Markers (of main and significant SDGs) for EU interventions allows for systematic tracking of the EU's external actions to the SDGs. Consistent with Recommendation 1.1, in 2023 the EU continued to invest in further expanding the SDG Mapper, with a project to reinforce its features and see options to integrate it in the platform OPSYS. It also maintains its cooperation with the OECD for further roll-out of the Total Official Support for Sustainable Development (TOSSD), including after its transformation into an international forum. In terms of guidance, as a matter of effectiveness, priority will be dissemination of existing guidance elaborated in the OECD on SDG reporting, and exploring from that point which areas may deserve further consideration. In relation to recommendation 1.2, the main areas exposed to risks of unintended externalities on other SDGs beyond those targeted by an intervention relate to climate change, environment, gender equality and human rights. In all these cases, there are already processes and mechanisms to address these interactions, including through the facilities mentioned. In addition, the case of SDG 10 inequalities is also being developed in a similar fashion, broadening the number of areas where this type of interactions are actively considered. Through the introduction of the Inequality Marker (I-Marker), the Commission has created a reporting and benchmarking system on the contribution of all interventions to reducing inequalities. On this basis, to make this issue more explicit and visible, the EU will address, based on this recommendation, how the work of these facilities can reinforce the SDG perspective of their activities. As to TOSSD, in line with the final recommendation as

Recommendations from the independent evaluation	Response of the EU services
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.	streamlined in the Executive Summary, the EU should promote updates to TOSSD to reflect main/significant contributions to SDGs. Consistent with Recommendation 1.3, the EU pays particular attention to interlinkages and integrated actions that can create mutual benefits and meet multiple objectives in a coherent way (see e.g. Art. 8.8 NDICI-GE). As the EUVR highlights, the EU will continue to assess synergies and trade-offs as it progresses towards sustainable development in an integrated manner, balancing the economic, social and environmental dimensions. This is also a central requirement to fulfilling the commitment to ensure policy coherence for sustainable development. The EUVR reaffirms that the EU will regularly improve its SDG indicator set, including addressing external spillover effects, and will further integrate SDGs across its reports. The EUVR's annexes contain specific examples of how these SDG interlinkages are addressed at EU level, in particular with innovative assessments and visualisations in relation to its ODA. Consistent with the Recommendations, the EU will aim to further enhance its SDG reporting, including on the linkages between Global Gateway investment projects and their contribution to the SDGs. In this respect, it is important to note that interlinkages are context-dependent and might play out differently across different geographical and temporal scales. The interlinkages database produced by the JRC on the knowSDGs platform has been designed to produce additional insights on possible interlinkages between SDG goals and targets. In relation to recommendation 1.4, the evaluation correctly points out that 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. In line with the recommendation as streamlined in the Executive Summary, there would be merits to explore how to establish comparable correlations for the broader set of core indicators (in addition to those indicators where such correlation is already explicit, e.g. UN SDG indicators).
R2	**Increase EU influencing with development actors** *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: "R2. 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.*	**Accepted** This recommendation is in line with the political message by the College to promote the SDGs internally and externally as laid down in the EUVR. The EU remains fully committed to promoting the 2030 Agenda, as reconfirmed by Commission President Von der Leyen at the 2023 SDG Summit. In its external action, the EU is positioning its

Recommendations from the independent evaluation	Response of the EU services
Opportunities also exist for EU delegations to collaborate with donors and OECD more strategically, notably to promote national data sets.". 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. 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.). **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).	Global Gateway Strategy as key contribution to mobilise investment in support of the SDGs. The roll-out of Global Gateway will be the main priority in EU Delegations. In line with the findings laid down in the executive summary, the EU is implementing the Global Gateway as a contribution to the Agenda 2030 and consistent with Recommendation 2.1 has already started to mainstream SDGs in Global Gateway investment projects, including at country-level. The EU aims to further strengthen its communication on the contribution it is making to the SDGs through Global Gateway. To this end, it will also assess how mainstreaming of SDGs can be better reflected in guidance to EU Delegation on the implementation of the Global Gateway Strategy. In partnership with its multilateral partners, the EU also will continue to seek ways of promoting SDG mainstreaming in a range of processes (at the UN, G20/G7, IFIs), including through supporting Integrated National Financing Frameworks (INFFs). The EU will continue to partner with the UN to promote policies and programmes contributing to SDG implementation, including financially when relevant. For example, between 2019 – 2022, it provided EUR 30 million in funding for INFFs through the SDG Fund. As part of its Team Europe approach, the EU seeks to rally its institutions, EU Member States, agencies and financial institutions around specific initiatives to increase SDG impact. Consistent with Recommendation 2.2, the EU aims to continue to work closely with the OECD on further improving the SDG reporting of ODA.
R3	**Establish a more detailed, updated and downscaled position and related guidance on how EU Delegations should or can 'do' SDGS better** *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: "R3. This would involve 1.) clarifying more specifically EU aspirations for SDGs at operational level and 2.) disseminating a Theory of*	**Partially accepted**

Recommendations from the independent evaluation	Response of the EU services
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".	Recommendation 3 is generally accepted to the extent that it builds on the actions and orientations reflected in the EUVR, notably in relation to Global Gateway, as well as on efforts and developments undertaken in the last years.
The EU should establish a more detailed updated and downscaled position on how to implement SDGs at EU Delegation level. 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*:	The Global Gateway Strategy, which is now the main priority for EU external action, also holds promise for enhanced SDG awareness. As stressed by President von der Leyen at the 2023 SDG Summit, the EU acknowledges the importance of linking Global Gateway projects to SDGs to mobilise the investment required. Through Global Gateway, delivered through a Team Europe approach, the EU seeks to use its rallying power to increase impact on SDGs through coordinated action between EU institutions, Member States, agencies and European development banks. As the EUVR reaffirms, the EU's Global Gateway strategy will directly contribute to making progress on a range of interlinked SDGs. The EU will continue to actively integrate the SDGs in the implementation of Global Gateway flagships and sustainable infrastructure investments, while stepping up efforts to mobilise private sector mobilisation in support of the SDGs.
• 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 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 (MS) 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	As the evaluation's Executive Summary indicates, the EU agrees that developing a detailed position on how EU Delegations can implement SDGs at country-level requires that SDGs are systematically integrated in Global Gateway initiatives during preparation and implementation, including integrating such perspective in guidance materials on Global Gateway – but this integration does not require specific standalone guidance. The evaluation rightly identifies that the preparation of guidance and other deliverables relates to the need to mobilise adequate human and financial resources. In spite of this challenging situation, to strengthen the SDG-related guidance for field-based staff, the EU aims to update it e-learning course on SDG mainstreaming. In addition, through the further development of the SDG marker, further efforts will be made to support effective SDG marking and, to the extent possible, better correlation with relevant indicators – especially if the SDG mapper can be eventually integrated in the OPSYS platform. The EU does not intend to disseminate the Theory of Change elaborated by the evaluators for the purpose of their evaluation report, being an analytical tool to structure their assessment tasks.

Recommendations from the independent evaluation	Response of the EU services
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. **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.	