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SHAPING SUSTAINABLE FUTURES: EU ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY AND DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION WITH AFRICA

István Kárász

Abstract

This article examines the European Union's (EU) role as a global actor in promoting sustainability through economic diplomacy and external policy instruments, particularly in a context of growing geopolitical instability and declining traditional development financing. It explores how the EU's institutional complexity – characterised by legal mandates and shared competences – both constrains rapid responses and reinforces its reputation as a reliable, rules-based partner. Focusing on the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI–Global Europe), the Team Europe approach, and the Global Gateway strategy, the article highlights the EU's efforts to mobilise investment and strengthen partnerships. A comparative analysis of the EU's agreements with Egypt and Angola illustrates how different diplomatic approaches affect partner engagement and development outcomes. The Egypt–EU cooperation, centred on the NWFE initiative, demonstrates a flexible and partner-led model that aligns with local priorities, backed by substantial EU and private sector commitments. In contrast, the Sustainable Investment Facilitation Agreement (SIFA) with Angola reveals a more prescriptive EU-led structure, raising concerns about power imbalances and limited local ownership, especially in the context of critical raw material interests. The article argues that in an era of "polycrises," the EU must refine its external action to enhance flexibility and responsiveness, while maintaining its multilateral and sustainability commitments. It suggests that inclusive, context-sensitive partnerships – anchored in mutual benefits and co-ownership – are more likely to yield long-term, transformative impacts in partner countries.

Keywords: EU, economic development, diplomacy, Africa, sustainability

Introduction

Due to the disruptive consequences of restrictive policies, imposed during the COVID-19 pandemics, combined with strengthening rivalry between major global economies, geopolitics and economies became much more volatile than in previous decades. According to the Global Peace Index 2024, there are currently 56 conflicts, which is the most since the World War II (Vision of Humanity, 2025). These conflicts and their negative spill-over effects are causing regional instabilities, that hinder the realization of several dimensions of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). Sub-Saharan Africa is notably exposed to the worsening global situation as the region's score worsened. As an example out of the 10 most affected countries by terrorism, 5 are located in the region. Additionally, out of the 44 countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, 36 were affected by at least one external conflict in the past 5 years (Vision of Humanity, 2025). Instability in geopolitics, security and economy show a significant decline compared to the pre-pandemic period and has created a widening financing gap - of 4 trillion USD - to meet the UNSDGs by 2030 (United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development, 2024). In this context, the European Union is aiming for stepping up as the leading actor to enhance sustainability through its economic and diplomatic means. The following article will provide some insights that showcase how the EU influences global, regional and national actors through its diplomatic approaches, external policy tools and what implications or projected implications it can have with regards to economic, social and environmental sustainability. To understand the EU's development and economic diplomacy in Africa, its strength and limitations, a practical description will outline its structural complexities. Following sections will also compare two main approaches, one focusing on the Mediterranean neighbourhood of the EU, the other on Sub-Saharan Africa. The paper will also suggest possible remedies to the EU's structural shortcomings that hinder its effectiveness in executing its priorities.

Sustainable Development Goals and guiding policies

The UNSDGs provide the first, comprehensive guidelines with 169 specific targets along 17 goals. These goals are considered as game changers in addressing global challenges and aimed to overcome some shortcomings of the Millennium Development Goals, like the lack of robust data and monitoring mechanism and the lack of inclusivity in formulation (Fukuda-Parr, 2013). Due to its clear and operationalizable structure as well as its appealing communication materials, the UNSDGs have became a global standard that is used across academia, businesses and the public sectors. On the diplomatic level, the framework can already be communicated as a success due to the high number of Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) that were presented by the majority of countries at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), which convenes annually under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) (United Nations, 2025). From the implementation point of view however, there is a significant gap in financing, preventing the related roadmap to achieve the set goals by 2030.

Based on the UNSDGs, the EU defined its own approach to SDG implementation and made those integral part of the European Commission's President's Political Guidelines (PPGs). These presidential guidelines framed EU policies within the period of 2019-2024 and put SDGs as foundational elements in all fields. Due to an economic downturn in the EU and criticism on a too narrow focus on environmental sustainability, in the new term, the previous focus of PPGs has become less pronounced for the period of 2024-2029, even though the European Green Deal remains valid with an extension of a Green Deal Industrial Plan (Leyen, 2024; European Commission, 2025).

EU diplomacy and its unique setting

To understand the EU's economic and development diplomacy, we need to acknowledge its unique complexities that are stemming from the unique structure of the EU. The EU's diplomatic corps, the European External Action Service (EEAS) conducts the EU's Foreign and Security Policy, to manage diplomatic relations, to promote peace and security, to coordinate external policies and to support EU delegations that work together and coordinate EU Member States' delegations (EEAS, 2025). These are done in coordination and cooperation with EU Member States (MS) – through the Council of the EU and MS' delegations - and the European Commission, while reporting periodically to the European Parliament. Therefore, the directionality of diplomatic views, mandates and ways of engagement depend on a multidimensional matrix from these entities. The weights of inputs within the matrix depend also on the division of competencies, set in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) which gives more autonomy in some subjects to the European Commission (for example with regards to the common commercial – or trade – policy) while in others, most or all MS need to agree for mandating the EEAS and the Commission to represent the EU's common point of view (European Union, 2017). At the same time, each MS have their fully autonomous bilateral relations with the countries where their diplomats are accredited. This setting respects MS' autonomy and aims to coordinate and aims to represent a common EU position where and when it is needed. However, it is not always successful due to the different views, positions and interests of MS. As an example, in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), MS tended to have a high, 70-80% alignment but in some highly sensitive geopolitical cases, high divergence could occur (Persson, 2012). Sustainability through SDGs, however are being considered as a shared goal of the EU and its Member States, despite some divergence in the approaches towards achieving the goals.

The EU as leading global partner for the SDGs

Based on the foundational documents of the EU, like the Lisbon Treaty and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, as well as related policies in overarching strategic documents of the EU and of the European Commission, like the Presidential Political Guidelines or the European Green Deal, the EU has its robust political, legal basis and strategic guidance on stepping up to promote and enhance sustainability in the wider world. As all MS supported the adoption of the UN's Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, on the main principles all of them agree. In terms of interpretation and implementation, there are differences that might limit the EU's diplomatic messages to remain on a horizontal and abstract level. However, there are more tools to enhance sustainability through economic and development diplomacy. For example, one of the major instruments the EU has during its current financial cycle (Multiannual Financial Framework – MFF), is the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation – Global Europe (NDICI-GE) that aims to support the EU's development cooperation with its international partners with a financial dedication of 79.5 billion EUR. Its toolbox is based on five priority areas: green deals; digital, science, technology and innovation; alliances for sustainable growth and development; migration partnerships; governance, peace and security, human development and its ultimate goal is to eradicate poverty, set in the TFEU (European Union, 2021). The above mentioned legal basis and the paired instruments and tools that enable the operationalisation of policies, provide the EU a solid background to step up in the world as a major actor. With its MS, the EU is the biggest donor of Official Development Assistance (ODA), accounted for 95.9 billion EUR in 2023 which is more than 42% of the overall global contribution (Council of the EU, 2024). ODA remains the major source of finance for the poorest countries and is crucial to achieve SDGs by 2030.

Challenges for EU diplomacy

Due to its complexities and varied mandates, the EU remains fragmented in its communication and in most cases it is not effective in taking fast and concrete actions during times of diplomatic emergencies. While data shows that the EU and its MS are the most important financial contributors to developing countries through development assistances (especially after the recent cuts in funding by the US), and are also championing the advocacy for sustainable development on the level of multilateral institutions, the recognition of these efforts and the perception of main beneficiaries are contradictory. The EU's means for diplomatic measures to respond to emergencies are restricted to diplomatic and financial measures. Diplomatic measures are questionable on the short-term and have their limits to their effectiveness, while financial measures have immediate impacts mostly on the already vulnerable population, especially in the context of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) (Rodrigíguez, 2023). These measures are further slowed down and weakened by the systemic challenges of the EU. As described, in the UN, EU MS tend to harmonise their approaches, in bilateral relations however, MS are still in lead and tend to act in an uncoordinated way due to their ability to respond faster and also because of their own contextual interests and historic ties to their partners. Therefore, sustainability tends to have a lower weight in those cases, where rapid response is being prepared.

As an example, since 2011, the EU have had an integrated approach, combining political engagement, security and defence support as well as development and humanitarian assistance in the Sahel region and also adopted a related strategy to address complex challenges (EEAS, 2021). Since the Russian war against Ukraine, the anti-EU (and especially the anti-France) sentiments have been growing due to the widely-accepted narrative that echoes the reasoning of the Russian government. It portrays the EU and France as powers that want to exploit local resources, presents the CFA franc (franc de la Communauté financière africaine) as a post-colonial attempt to remain in control over the African economies, also the sanctions as the major cause of food inflation and shortage, emphasises the Wagner group's effectiveness in fighting against terrorist groups and claims many more, causing major unrest in the region.

In the meantime, several coups were conducted successfully and militant governments strengthened their relations with Russian mercenary groups, further weakening the position of the EU in this critical region. In response, France suspended its military support and withdrew its contingent that was sent to fight against terrorist organisations within the country. As a retaliatory action, both Burkina Faso and Niger declared French ambassadors as persona non grata. In the meantime, the EU and EEAS suspended financial assistances but have kept their delegations on ground and the humanitarian aid flows active, to prevent major costs and losses of the full closure of diplomatic relations. The same approach is used for example in Afghanistan and Venezuela. These show, that the EU through its delegations uses also a stricter policy on engagement. The approach to the Sahel region and ECOWAS countries show that the EU and its MS are highly divided in the question and are approaching these countries, conflicts and governments in different ways and thus three broad approaches emerged. France and the EEAS are considered as hardliners, leaving few openings for diplomatic, developmental or military cooperation and prefer a de facto, if any type of, engagement. The same applies to Denmark and Sweden, on the basis of human-rights principles. Belgium, Netherlands and Germany are considered as the middle ground by maintaining embassies but not engaging in security-related issues with de facto militias and governments. Italy and Spain at the same time are considered as realpolitikers and engage with juntas where Europe's strategic interests are concerned. There are several analyses and cases that indicate partial results or failures of the above mentioned approaches but in the context of varied degrees of engagement there is one certainty; that is the recognition that staying engaged is needed, no matter what the circumstances are. If not, other competing powers will fill in the gap. Also, to be more effective, more cooperation between MS and EU institutions is needed (Brown, 2024). These varied approaches question the existence of common EU bilateral policies in times of crises, especially with countries of complex political context. Therefore, it is challenging, if possible at all, to assess the impact and implications of the EU's diplomatic response. The EU's relations with countries that have legitimate governments is more straightforward and is now ongoing under a reassessment, while new approaches are being initiated by the Council and the Commission, based on geographic proximity, social, political and economic interests.

An approach to enhance internal coordination: Team Europe

To further expand on criticism above, often, there is a lack of coordination amongst MS and EU institutions, therefore the so called "Team Europe" was initiated in 2020 to have a coordinated approach between MS, EU Institutions, their development agencies and financial institutions (like the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Banks for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)). The approach is implemented through Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs) that are projects, voluntarily initiated and implemented by groups of

TE members. Currently there are 169 TEIs worldwide and all of these have aspects that aim to enable to reach SDGs. TEIs are key in development partnerships and are backbones of development in Low Income and Least Developed Countries that are in partnership with the EU (DG INTPA, 2025). This framework for coordination enabled a constructive and systemic dialogue between related stakeholders and has a major positive impact in achieving SDGs. Major objectives of the initiatives include Green and Digital Transition, Health and Education, Economic recovery and private sector development as well as peace, security and migration. TE most importantly focuses on the needs of partner countries and aims to address those in a joint and organised manner.

Besides TEIs, the European Commission announced its Global Gateway strategy to "boost smart, clean and secure links in digital, energy and transport sectors and to strengthen health, education and research systems around the world" (European Commission, 2025). While the strategy has a broader focus (education, research, health), its main aim is to build hard infrastructures that also enhance enabling environments in partner countries for development and to mobilise with TE up to 300 billion EUR, including private capital.

A new approach for mutual engagement: Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership Agreements

With this comprehensive type of non-binding approach, the European Commission wanted to address several key issues in North Africa and the Middle East, that were highlighted in the section on challenges. While MS' bilateral relations are important in advocating national interests in a country or region, as well as the Council of the EU plays role in amending and approving agreements, the European Commission leads negotiations, the EEAS and EU Delegations coordinate the political and strategic aspects and the European Parliament has also a consultation role, while in cases of budgetary approvals of micro-financial instruments, their consent is needed, and they have a co-decision power with the Council of the EU related to financial instruments (like NDICI-GE). The process, therefore includes enough safeguards and guarantees for stakeholders to provide a transparent and democratic procedure, while the nature of the agreement is not legally binding, like Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), therefore it gives the Commission the flexibility to act fast.

Due to the above listed reasons, comments by EU MS as well as of partner countries' governments (like the Egyptian government), are so far positive. These agreements allow sufficient flexibility in programming and initiating programmes. As partner countries are being engaged from the inception and have the governing role throughout the implementation, the ownership of related projects is ensured, while keeping alignment with major EU values and policy priorities. Therefore, in case of Egypt sustainability was highlighted, especially related to sustainable infrastructure, renewable energy, food security, health and education, water and sanitation amongst others in its NFWE country platform for development (MoPEDIC, 2024). The significant direct and indirect financial allocations of the EU (as Team Europe) and its partners, its related architectures, like the European Financial Architecture for Development (EFAD) to stabilise the partner countries' financial markets and currencies, have also an attractive effect to domestic and international private businesses to invest. As all related instruments, tools, architectures as well as the internal policies of the EU's Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), like the EIB and EBRD, have sustainability policies as underpinning elements, all benefitting stakeholders are monitored by European financing institutions to implement their projects with a broad vision towards achieving SDGs, be it social, environmental or economic aspects. In the historical context, this means related direct financing by the EU of 7.6 billion EUR between 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2025), of sustainable investments of 15.19 billion by the EIB, 13.8 billion EUR by the EBRD. Also, significant MS have dedicated significant contributions to Egypt's sustainability measures (MoPEDIC, 2025). This underlines the importance of the EU's soft and hard diplomacy that have a systemic effect in transforming public policies, economies and - on a longer-term - societies to acknowledge the importance of sustainable practices and environmentally conscious investments.

A new approach for investment facilitation: Sustainable Investment Facilitation Agreement (SIFA)

Another framework of economic engagement between the EU and its Sub-Saharan partner countries is the SIFA which aims to improve the partner countries' business climate by providing a predictable and safe economic and legal environment, as well as to improve mutual engagement and ownership towards common objectives. As the name indicates, the framework highlights sustainability goals as major guiding principles, therefore social, environmental, governance and economic sustainability are emphasised (European Commission, 2025). This framework agreement is in line with the Samoa Agreement with Africa, Caribbean Pacific States (ACP) (Council of the EU, 2023) and is a part of the Global Gateway Strategy that aims to mobilise 300 billion EUR investment for sustainable and high-quality projects (European Commission, 2025). This agreement needed the consent of the European Parliament and adoption by the Council which was finally granted in 2024. This legally binding agreement provides mutual recognition of the importance of fair competition and grants protection to investments, hence improving the business environment for potential investors. At the same time, it limits the State's regulatory power to make it consistent with the aim to promote sustainable investments (Terrinha, 2025). As the agreement came into power one year ago, it is too early to discuss the outcomes but signing SIFA can be considered as a successful diplomatic act by both sides.

Comparison of the Egyptian and Angolan agreements in the current global context

Due to the ongoing revision of the American aid and development funds, and an overall shrinking space for the traditional Official Development Assistance (ODA) type of funding, SDGs are at risk. To sustain progress, a cooperative approach would be needed between all major actors from the private and public sectors, with the Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), Development Finance Institutions (DFIs), emerging donors, and in line with local needs.

Current megatrends show different dynamics and a polarising world. To counter this trend, and an era of polycrises, complex and overarching approaches are needed, addressing real local needs in a mutually beneficial, inclusive way of implementation. The EU and its MS approaches are complex and require lengthy procedures, which on the one hand create demanding challenges. On the other hand, they provide an opportunity to show the reliability of the community as lengthy procedures can also have their positive effects. Institutionally and procedurally, the EU has robust checks and balances both from the legal, political and division of power perspectives. Therefore, the EU is, in most contexts, a transparent and a predictable partner which can enhance partner countries resilience through sustained investments and trade due to lower risk.

NFWE in Egypt was mentioned as an exemplary model that allows the partner country to initiate and align policy objectives based on compromise with international funding partners. This platform and framework of coordination allow Egyptian authorities to remain the controlling stakeholder and execute mutually agreed development agendas according to their sovereign priorities. In the implementation of the Egyptian development priorities, the EU took a leading role by dedicating financial and investment support for the period of 2024-2027. Also, during the Egypt – EU Investment Conference the private sector and the EU expressed their intention to invest around 50 billion EUR in Egypt. The contribution of the financial sector is necessary but innovative and efficient structures are needed, especially in fragile country settings. As mentioned before, EFAD enables stakeholders in development financing to coordinate and therefore to free up additional resources that can be transferred to the development of a country (European Commisison, 2022). The success of these efforts, however, is a shared responsibility of Team Europe. Team Europe actors must remain engaged, united, and open to partnerships with emerging donors and other key stakeholders. They should also engage diplomatically with partner countries – such as Egypt – in a respectful, empathetic, and equal manner. It is commendable that there is a clear intention to pursue sustainable investments with a positive sustainability impact, though without the overly restrictive approach seen in the case of SIFA. Even though it is too early to draw conclusions, but in 2024 there was a significant positive change of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows (CEIC, 2025). The recent and frequent high-level bilateral visits by both EU institutions and Member States demonstrate encouraging progress in partnership approaches across much of the North African region. These visits provide a strong example of how mutually beneficial partnerships can be established, moving beyond the traditional donor–recipient dynamic.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, SIFA was mentioned as an approach which has been signed so far only between the EU and Angola. While it is not yet possible to discuss the effectiveness of its implementation, it can provide a good case for comparison with the Strategic and Comprehensive Strategic Agreement type of approach, focusing on neighbouring Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries. While in case of Egypt, the overarching governing role is visibly on the side of the Egyptian authorities, addressing the incremental needs of the country in a sustainable and mutually beneficial way with the EU, in case of SIFA an imbalance can be observed while assessing the text of the agreement. The language of the agreement is prescriptive, with the EU directing requests – including sustainability measures – toward Angola in a way that does not reflect an equal partnership. According to some related papers, the absence of protection standards and the "exclusive focus" on sustainable investments may counter this narrative (Andreotti, 2024). We cannot deny the fact, however that Angola is a resource rich country and major interest by European FDI is related to critical raw material (CRM) extraction. Therefore, in case of Angola, a power imbalance can be observed from the diplomatic point of view. From the side of sustainability logic, the agreement is more direct. It has sustainability-related direct requirements that Angola should respect which might restrict FDI inflows due to expectedly high administrative burdens, stemming from related environmental standards and requirements. Conclusions are yet to be drawn, once the effective implementation and operationalisation of SIFA is underway but so far in terms of FDI, past years negative flow seems to continue (UNCTAD, 2024).

Suggestions, Conclusion

Due to the EU's institutional framework, where actions are bound strictly by legal mandates, its communication cannot always be as swift, political, or forceful as that of sovereign states in their bilateral relations. Its capacity for rapid response is further constrained by lengthy legal procedures, particularly in cases requiring ratification or formal agreement by Member States and the European Parliament. Nonetheless, despite these complexities and the EU's unique setup, its combined hard and soft diplomatic efforts can have far-reaching and transformative impacts – especially in advancing sustainability objectives. One of the EU's key strengths in today's volatile global context is its reliability as a partner, rooted in its robust system of checks and balances. When EU institutions and Member States act together as Team Europe, the potential for large-scale, systemic change in partner countries significantly increases. However, in situations requiring rapid response, a more flexible approach is essential. Instruments like the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership Agreement – non-binding in nature – are particularly valuable, as they aim to facilitate and deepen bilateral relations between the EU and its partners. It is visible, that instead of relying on personal assertiveness and persuasive power, the EU can mostly rely on its expertise in facilitating stakeholders and on its economic background as the world's largest single market. This technocratic way of diplomacy, however is less responsive, therefore less effective in cases of global economic, social and security turnovers. The EU must reconsider the structural framework of its economic and development diplomacy, simplify its processes and messages, to enhance its responsiveness and effectiveness while maintaining its commitment to multilateralism. While acknowledging the limitations of the article in failing to provide exact data on correlations and of the effectiveness of different approaches of the EU to its partner countries with regards to sustainability, it aims to provide a structured and broad view of the currently applicable frameworks and their unique structural setting.[6]

6 Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this text are solely those of the interviewee and do not reflect, in any way, the position or policies of the country he represents.

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