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Introduction

EU development policy: evolving as an instrument of foreign policy and as an expression of solidarity

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Abstract

This article introduces the special issue on the evolution of European Union development policy, against the background of fundamental challenges that have emerged since the 2009 Lisbon Treaty. The special issue's objective is to highlight the complex dynamics of a policy area that is called on to address the massive challenges of poverty, inequality, healthcare capacity, climate change, insecurity and weak governance in countries of the global south, and at the same time support European foreign policy objectives including political stability, migration management, access to resources and markets. In this introductory article, we attempt to sketch the broad outlines of the conceptual and practical dilemmas faced by a policy area that is supposed to be able to fix almost any problem. We observe that European development policy's evolution is driven by the tension between its *raison d'être* as a concrete expression of global solidarity and international cooperation, and its increasing instrumentalisation in the service of European economic and security interests. We highlight some of the key challenges that have emerged in the last decade, including rising populist nationalism and Brexit within Europe, the changing nature of relationships between Europe and countries who receive EU aid, and the changing nature of development cooperation itself, exemplified by the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. We outline the specific contributions the articles in this special issue make to research and policy debates on the themes we raise in this introduction. We conclude that the battle between the forces of solidarity and instrumentality has evolved EU development policy into an impossibly complex arena of competing norms, practices and institutions, which raises many open questions for future research.

Keywords

EU development policy, EU foreign policy, solidarity, instrumentalisation

EU DEVELOPMENT POLICY: THE ONE YOU TURN TO WHEN THE CHIPS ARE DOWN

The EU's international development policy has been evolving continuously over the last decade, in response both to the shifting international development landscape and to shifting political realities inside the EU. Since the Lisbon Treaty came into force in 2009, the global impacts of the 2008 financial crisis became apparent and the austerity with which many EU governments responded to the ensuing Euro crisis had both financial and political consequences for development cooperation (Berginer 2019). Increasing migration pressure on Europe, due to myriad factors including demographic change, increasing global inequality, the impacts of climate change on many developing regions, wars and mass displacement, and incoherent European immigration policies, has had huge impacts on development policy frameworks and aid budgets, especially since the Syrian refugee crisis in the autumn of 2015 (Knoll and Sherriff 2017).

Since 2015, global development has itself been reconceptualised as an interrelated set of multifaceted economic, environmental, and institutional challenges by the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with far-reaching implications for the norms and practices of international development cooperation (Brown 2020). Meanwhile, geopolitical shifts, including the rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, China, India and South Africa) and Arabian Gulf donors, the retreat of the United States from its pre-eminent role in global development, and the fast-approaching end of the 'post-colonial' development paradigm, are all challenging the EU to re-define its global position as a leading donor of official development assistance, and as a decision-making system where global development norms and standards are set (Gänzle et al. 2012; Schöneberg 2016).

EU development policy is not only expected to address the consequences of poverty, inequality, weak governance, climate change, environmental degradation and unmanaged migration. It has also come to be seen as the EU's 'cornerstone' policy, able to address the 'root causes' of these phenomena, including socio-economic exclusion, continued reliance on fossil fuels, unsustainable agricultural practices, violent conflict, elite corruption and political repression. For example, development policy has been called upon to respond to the unprecedented shock from the Coronavirus crisis in 2020, even before the consequences of the pandemic for developing countries could have been known (Urpilainen 2020). Such enormous expectations inevitably raise impossible demands on political decision-makers and the bureaucratic systems through which policies are defined, negotiated and implemented. However, despite all these demands on development policy, the budgets for financing cooperation have remained well below the 0.7% of GNI commitment for aid spending in most EU countries (Orbie and Lightfoot 2017).

THE EVOLUTION OF EU DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN RESPONSE TO THE FORCES OF SOLIDARITY AND INSTRUMENTALITY

The evolution of EU development policy has been traditionally influenced by several long-term, mostly unresolved puzzles. These include the challenges of working together in a policy area defined as a 'shared competence' in EU legalese, meaning that the policies of the EU institutions should not compromise the ability of member states to pursue their bilateral development policies and cooperation programmes.¹ This structural issue has in turn made the question of how member states and EU institutions should work together a matter of interpretation and constant re-negotiation, resulting in inherent challenges of coordination, both at the strategic/policy level and at the level of the implementation of programmes and projects in partner countries (Koch 2015).

A further, long-term challenge is that of policy coherence, both in terms of managing the so-called 'nexuses' between EU-level policies like agriculture, trade, foreign/security policy

and development, as well as clear incoherencies with member state policies like migration, tax and fiscal regimes, or arms sales (Adelle and Jordan 2014; Carbone and Keijzer 2016, Furness and Gänzle 2017). At a conceptual level, these issues have been debated not only by scholars of EU development policy but also as part of the broader external relations discussions of the EU's 'actorness' or, its nature, purpose and effectiveness as a global actor (Bretherton and Vogler 2006; Niemann and Bretherton 2013).

In addition to these long-term, structural questions, one may add a long list of challenges that have emerged in the decade since the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty. Many of these concern matters that have always been on top of the EC/EU development policy agenda. For instance, while relationships with Africa, both at the continent-to-continent level of AU-EU relations, and at the levels of EU relations with individual African countries and bilateral relations between EU member states and African countries, have become less 'post-colonial,' they have not evolved into 'partnerships of equals' (Gomes 2013; Barbarinde 2019; Carbone 2019). Nevertheless, the days when the EU or certain member states could impose their will in Africa are over. This is partly due to the influence of emerging actors like the BRICS countries, whose impact in Africa has grown and provided African countries with alternative markets and development models to that offered by the EU. The increasing influence of the BRICS (especially China) in Africa has led to relative decline in the EU's influence in the region, including the attractiveness of the values promoted by the EU (Hackenesch 2018).

New priorities on the political agendas of many European governments have had major implications for European development policies at both the member state and at the EU level. Arguably, the most significant of these has been increased migration pressure on the EU from outside of Europe, driven by demographic factors, as well as by economic inequality and forced displacement due to conflict and environmental degradation. While the political fall-out can be seen most clearly in the Syrian refugee crisis of the autumn of 2015, this built on many other preceding situations and has been kept alive by ensuing ones. The ways in which the migration challenge has been interpreted and politicised have led to a number of potentially conflicting demands on the EU's external policies. Member state policy makers have called on the EU to use its diplomatic influence and especially its development resources to halt the flow of refugees and migrants through programmes and projects that aim to address the so-called 'root causes' of migration and displacement, and by attempting to make the disbursement of aid conditional on cooperation on migration and security matters (Rozbicka and Szent-Iványi 2020). Many development researchers, as well as prominent voices in the European Commission and Parliament, have emphasized the positive impacts of migration for development, and have argued that the EU needs to better harness this by developing channels for controlled migration (Knoll and Sheriff 2017).

In the development cooperation field itself, the agenda has been broadened from the 'make poverty history' narrative and the Millennium Development Goals of the 2000s to the sustainable development narrative and the SDGs. This shifted the main focus from poverty and health to attempting to capture the essentially multifaceted and interrelated nature of global development, while at the same time effectively making every conceivable policy area relevant from a development perspective (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019). Such transformations raise questions not only about what the scope and contents of EU and member state development policies should be, but also highlight many unresolved issues around policy coherence (Carbone and Keijzer, 2016).

The EU has taken a leading role in driving the sustainable development agenda, and has built for itself a position that has brought a new set of challenges and responsibilities. At a discursive level and especially after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the EU has been

one of the most active promoters of the principles of international partnerships. However, due to the dynamics between reformers and status-quo defenders within the EU's legal and policymaking systems, as well as the divergent views that the EU and partner countries have expressed, the actual changes aimed at making eye-level cooperation the major principle for advancing sustainable development have been much less ambitious than promised. The EU has not yet fully replaced the system of asymmetrical donor-recipient relationships (Keijzer and Black, 2020).

These recent global shifts have also been complemented by internal challenges to the EU, many of which raise questions linked to international cooperation. Brexit arguably poses the most important challenge among these. Before its withdrawal from the organisation, the UK was one of the largest contributors to the EU's international development spending. At the same time, as one of the world's largest bilateral donors, it has added significant clout to the EU's engagements with developing countries. The UK has also been one of the more influential shapers of the EU's development and neighbourhood policies in the past decades, and its retreat from EU policymaking on development started to be felt as soon as the referendum on EU membership was announced in late 2015 (Lightfoot et al. 2017). A further, related set of challenges has been posed by the rise of nationalist populism, both within Europe and internationally. Feelings in Western societies that political and economic elites have become detached from and irresponsible to the needs of the people have been exploited by populist politicians of various stripes. An implication of this for development policy has been the calls made by both populists, and policymakers looking to outflank populists, for development aid to better serve the 'national interest', which has often been portrayed to be at odds with global goals (Thier and Alexander, 2019). Despite increasing evidence on the negative effects of such measures on all involved parties (Fine et al. 2019), populist politicians have argued for cutting aid and using the resources domestically, or refocussing aid on preventing migration (Gomez-Reino 2019).

Arguably, the cumulative effect of these challenges has been to exacerbate a fundamental dilemma for European development cooperation: achieving the right balance between solidarity, on the one hand, and instrumentality on the other. Solidarity is the core value of the international development social contract, in which the rich world is supposed to help poor countries end poverty and eventually create prosperity for all (Lumsdaine 1993). Whether this is driven by moral values and altruism, or some form of "enlightened self-interest" is secondary; aid influenced by solidarity places the concerns of the poor at its centre. Instrumentality refers to the tendency to see development aid, and also other cooperation tools that are intended to support public goods provision, rather as instruments for creating 'private' gain, whether this is derived from the national interests of a donor country or indeed the private interests of individuals and groups that can influence policy (Asongu and Jellal 2016). In this sense, aid becomes an instrument of pursuing policy or other goals which are essentially outside of the realm of development policy.

The literature on EU development cooperation has explored this dilemma from various perspectives. Scholars working with positivist analytical frameworks have discussed the challenges to collective action, both in terms of actors working together, and in terms of the coherence of substantive policy issues which contradict and undermine each other (Bodenstein et al. 2017; McLean 2013; Schneider and Tobin 2013). Others working from social constructivist perspectives have addressed the questions of identity and values that the dilemma raises, as well as the practical implications of the EU's 'Janus-faced' tendency to say one thing in its policy documents and do something quite different in the actual practice of its cooperation with developing countries (Hadfield 2007; Babarinde 2019).

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The contributions to this special issue aim to further advance this literature through the exploration, analysis and discussion of key issues that have brought the solidarity – instrumentality dilemma into focus in various ways in the decade since the Lisbon Treaty. At the same time, they highlight important aspects of the processes through which the European Union is evolving, both as an international development actor and as a policymaking system, due to the tensions created by the core solidarity-instrumentality dilemma. We have arranged the articles in three groups based on their thematic focus, bookended by a broader reflection that revisits several of the issues raised in this introduction.

The first set of articles explores the ways in which the guiding policy frameworks for development policy are evolving and are challenged by various actors, in response to the global geopolitical shifts and political pressure from within the EU. Both articles in this set illustrate internal and external pressures towards greater aid instrumentalisation, and show that the EU has not been immune to these.

Holden's article discusses the dilemma between solidarity and instrumentality in the context of rising global illiberalism and other challenges, which have led to the increasing dominance of a new 'geoeconomic' or neomercantilist worldview among policy makers (Holden 2020). This approach to making sense of global affairs facilitates the use of aid as an instrument for promoting political and economic self-interest. Holden analyses the shift towards geoeconomics in a historical context, and examines how it has impacted the EU's development policy. Specifically, Holden focuses on how the EU has framed two policy initiatives: blended finance and the merging of development funds into a single integrated financial instrument. Both of these initiatives would allow the greater instrumentalisation of aid for economic and geopolitical purposes. Nevertheless, Holden concludes that due to its nature, the EU is less susceptible to these kinds of pressures than its member states, or other nation-states like the United States are. These conclusions imply that while the EU is not immune to greater aid instrumentalisation, solidarity may continue to be a feature of its development policy.

The article by Szent-Iványi and Kugiel (2020) examines how the 'illiberal' populist governments in Hungary and Poland have shifted their countries' international development policies, and have attempted to shape the policy on the EU level. In a sense, both countries have promoted the shift towards a greater instrumentalisation of EU development aid, especially in terms of managing the flows of refugees and migrants, with Hungary being especially vocal and disruptive. The paper argues that while Poland sees the recent changes in EU development policy regarding the aid-migration nexus as favourable (and evidence of the Polish government's influence), Hungary would want the EU to implement even more radical changes. However, the article also notes that Hungary may have instrumentalised development policy in its own way, using it to send signals of its willingness to become a more disruptive member should the EU become tougher in challenging the authoritarian nature of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's governance.

The second set of articles addresses the issue of how the challenges outlined at the beginning of this introduction have impacted on specific aspects of European development policy, and in turn have influenced the EU's ability to shape the international development landscape.

Hurt's article focuses on the post-Cotonou partnership negotiations with Africa and is specifically concerned with the scope for increased 'African agency' in shaping a new relationship with the EU (Hurt 2020). The article contributes an important new case-study

to the existing literature on 'African agency' in international politics by considering the scope for Africa to exert agency within the post-Cotonou negotiations, given the negotiation of a specific regional compact with Africa. It adopts a structurally embedded view of agency, as a fit between institutions, ideas and material relations. Hurt's central argument is that, in comparison to the negotiation of the Cotonou Agreement two decades ago, there is greater scope for African agency. However, both the ideational and material aspects of Africa's relationship with the EU condition the limits to how effective such agency might be. The EU envisages a greater role for the private sector and remains determined to continue to base its trade relationship with Africa on Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) in the short-medium term. In recent years, African institutions have expressed bold aims for industrialisation and job creation, but the EU's vision – which is based on advancing European economic and political interests – will hinder, rather than support, this ambition.

Kugiel (2020) discusses the division of labour (DoL) in European development cooperation, which was regarded as a high priority in the 2000s and early 2010s but all but disappeared from the agenda later in the decade. Though the Union still promotes joint programming for better aid coordination, other EU interests took precedence. This reflects the general trend of instrumentalisation in European development cooperation, which is less focused on traditional goals like poverty eradication or aid effectiveness but serves more political, security, and economic self-interests. Kugiel traces the evolution of the European approach to DoL and highlights the major reasons for its limited successes. He argues that among the most important of these was the imprecise and inadequate description of the EU's own comparative advantage and added value, compared to member state bilateral aid programmes. Kugiel proposes the concept of functional DoL, in which the European institutions focus development assistance more on the regional level, while leaving national programmes to the member states.

In her article, Rabinovych (2020) notes that the EU's long-term commitment to development cooperation and the pre-existing policy support for the 2030 Agenda in the EU institutions indicate an ongoing political consensus, especially on human rights aspects. Nevertheless, she argues that the current legal framework presents several interconnected challenges at both international and EU levels that could allow states to adopt a more instrumental approach. The 2030 Agenda is a non-binding international agreement, which, as a soft law document, is connected to international treaty law particularly through the signatories' commitment to implement pre-existing treaties. It therefore has significant potential to impact international customary law and to encourage cross-fertilization between international and EU law. However, due the fact that existing International Court of Justice opinions on the nature of UN General Assembly resolutions are contradictory, it cannot prevent states from developing different interpretations and approaches to the 2030 Agenda, which could in turn facilitate an instrumental view of development cooperation. However, the consensual nature of the 2030 Agenda, its connections to 'hard' law, the existing practice of 'substantive borrowing' from international law to EU law when gaps are identified, and the scope of the SDGs, which is strongly connected to the EU's principles and values, also suggest that the solidarity dimension may remain significant and influence the future evolution of EU law in this area.

The third group of articles engages with the topic of how the UK leaving has started to impact EU development cooperation, and the scope for continued, bespoke British involvement in EU development initiatives, especially the new convention between the EU and the ACP countries, and the European Development Fund.

Olivié and Perez's article explores the potential medium-term impact of Brexit on both EU and global aid (Olivié and Perez 2020). Their results show that UK aid has increased since

the Brexit vote in 2016. This has come in hand with a shifting pattern of allocation: increases in aid provided for domestic research in health issues, stronger links with private actors and with academia, a fall in aid directed to least developed countries, and the dispersion of aid funds across several ministries. These changes are aligned with a realist scenario, rather than reflecting nationalist behaviour on the part of the UK, which would result in decreasing aid and weaker links with partner countries. As a result, Olivié and Perez argue that there will be no major impacts on global aid levels. However, given that the EU is losing the UK's contribution to the general budget, and also a major bilateral donor, the EU's aid will be strongly cut. Moreover, given that post-Brexit EU-UK collaboration on aid matters remains unlikely, British funds formerly channelled via EU institutions are likely to be re-internalized and allocated according to the shifted pattern of British aid.

Langan's article unpacks the notion that Brexit would lead to greater solidarity with Africa, from the UK rather than from the EU (Langan 2020). He notes that prominent Brexiteers claimed that the UK's newfound independence would usher in a new era, whereby the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and a resurgent UK Department for International Trade (DFIT) would be able to offer aid and free trade unencumbered by the cynicism of the European Commission. Recent policy papers from both DFID and DFIT, however, have made clear that the UK intends to replicate the Economic Partnership Agreements with sub-regions of the ACP bloc. Langan considers that despite a rhetorical commitment to a more equal partnership between the UK and many African countries, the reality of the UK's post-Brexit vision for development will intensify a 'new scramble for Africa'. This will have major implications as to how the UK and the EU manage their broader relationships in the area of development cooperation.

The final article in this special issue builds on these three themes and takes a critical look at the past, present and future of EU development cooperation and research. Delputte and Orbie (2020) focus on the difficulty of identifying change and continuity in the EU's development policy. While rhetoric from EU leaders of paradigm shifts, 'new chapters' and 'fresh starts' has been frequent in the past decades, Delputte and Orbie argue that radical breaks in how the EU approaches its relationships with developing countries are not easily visible in practice. The changes that have happened, via the various policy experiments discussed in the article, fit into the EU's existing paradigm of development, which critics have labelled 'Eurocentric, modernist and colonial' (Schöneberg 2016). Delputte and Orbie deploy insights from paradigm change and post-development theory, and outline a new research agenda which can make better sense of change and continuity, as well as promote thinking along different paradigms to better appreciate the 'pluriverse' of alternatives to development. In this sense, the dilemma between solidarity and instrumentalisation fits squarely in the EU's existing development paradigm, and movements in practice towards greater solidarity or greater instrumentalisation do not represent new chapters, but rather pendulum swings in emphasis.

EMERGING TRENDS IN EU DEVELOPMENT POLICY AND RESEARCH

The articles in this collection suggest that at least three trends are emerging, which open fascinating and challenging avenues for research on EU development policy over the next decade or so.

First, aid has become increasingly instrumentalised, shifting away from the principles of the post-millennium international aid effectiveness agenda and more towards a situation where aid has become a tool for pursuing the political interests of donors. The instrumentalisation of aid is contested, both from outside development policy decision-

making systems and from within, and there remain many instances of aid spending and new cooperation initiatives along lines that are entirely consistent with the principles of international solidarity expressed by the global aid and development effectiveness agenda (Saltnes 2020). Nevertheless, the pressure to use aid as a tool for pursuing foreign or domestic policy interests that are not consistent with these principles is enormous and this is having a clear impact, both on the framing of strategy and the programming of aid (Hadfield and Lightfoot 2020).

Second, achieving policy coherence for development as an outcome has always been a tough challenge, due to the power imbalances of interest constituencies responsible for policymaking in key areas which can undermine the core goal of development policy, namely poverty eradication in developing countries. In recent years, the increasing complexity of global development means that policy coherence has become all but impossible. This is not only a problem for the EU – all actors engaged in development cooperation face the ‘wicked problem’ of making policies coherent with each other, and the SDGs themselves, some of which are mutually incoherent, have not helped in this regard. Accordingly, the effort to make policies coherent with each other will have to be abandoned in favour of approaches that prioritise between mutually inconsistent objectives, thereby forcing policymakers to face the political trade-offs that must inevitably arise.

Third, the EU is still struggling to find a role for itself in the modern world. This will not become easier if the EU itself continues to be weakened and undermined by rising nationalism in Europe, and consequently by less willingness to show solidarity with and cooperate with others. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s first international trip was to Africa. In doing so, she clearly indicated that the geopolitical priorities for her Commission included a closer relationship with Europe’s neighbouring continent. From a development cooperation perspective, the most significant change from the Juncker to the von der Leyen Commission is the replacement of the EU ‘Development’ Commissioner with a Commissioner for ‘International Partnerships’. It remains unclear whether this marks a rhetorical or substantive change, although it has been noted that the new title is less neo-colonial sounding (Delputte and Orbie 2020).

In this context, the articles in this special issue indicate that future research on the dilemma between solidarity and instrumentality in EU development cooperation could engage more closely with the following themes. There is, for example, already a need to explore in more depth the connection between, on the one hand, democratic institutions and practices, and, on the other hand, the potentially anti-democratic politics-policy nexuses within the global, EU and local landscapes of international cooperation for development. Research will need to trace the engagement of individuals and actors with phenomena like increasing digitalisation, which is already raising significant challenges to the solidarity / instrumentality dilemma at national, EU and global levels. The increasing securitisation of cooperation with countries in the global south will remain a key topic for research, both with regard to nexus-management at the operational level, as well as at the policy level as the voices calling for the militarisation of the EU grow louder (Borrell and Breton 2020). A further theme is the tension raised by the migration-development nexus between the demands of domestic constituencies, whose taxes pay for development aid, and politics in partner countries. This dilemma is most clearly raised by the increased use of aid for migration management purposes, but it is also present in the fact that economic development can increase migration levels, even though aid increases are often sold as measures to address the ‘root causes’ of migration (Knoll and Sheriff 2017). Whose solidarity is EU development cooperation supposed to serve?

While the impacts of the 2020 Covid-19 crisis for the EU and its development partners are still unfolding at the time of writing, it is clear that they will be far-reaching. As one senior European Commission official has noted, Covid-19 'represents the biggest ever stress test for development cooperation and its ability to address shared global challenges, including in their political dimension' (Manservigi 2020). The EU's initial response to the crisis provides a case study of what this introductory article has addressed. The rousing rhetoric around the TEAM Europe package promised to combine resources from the EU, its member states, and financial institutions, in particular the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, to support vulnerable countries in their fight against the pandemic. Once again, development policy was being deployed in a crisis to fix a problem, but with regard to its 'root causes' (viral transmission and the lack of health sector capacity) and its potential socio-economic fallout. The kind of multi-agency cooperation promised by the EU can be seen as an important step in more effective delivery. However, the fact that the 20 billion euros pledged were not additional but rather reallocated from existing external action resources immediately raised concerns that the EU was promising more than it could deliver, and that other important programmes which had not been allocated specific budgets would be left on the shelf as the crisis response absorbed resources. Such concerns reflect agreement among experts that Covid-19 will put immense pressure on member state budgets for many years, further contributing to the 'inward looking agenda' of the EU (Beringer et al. 2019; Rios 2020).

Instrumentality is, therefore, likely to dominate the political agenda in all areas of EU external action in the short term. Nevertheless, although the pendulum has swung towards instrumentality, this does not mean it cannot swing back. The shock of the 2020 Covid-19 crisis clearly demonstrated the need for solidarity with regard to global health, if not with regard to the best way to deal with the social and economic consequences of a pandemic. The challenge is therefore to ensure that amid the pressures placed on the European Union by the pandemic, the central concept of solidarity is not forgotten in development policy and practice.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Article 4): "In the areas of development cooperation and humanitarian aid, the Union shall have competence to carry out activities and conduct a common policy; however, the exercise of that competence shall not result in Member States being prevented from exercising theirs."

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