

RESEARCH REPORT: COVID-19 SERIES



EU External Action and Development Spending in a Time of Covid-19



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Abbreviations

ACP	Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (region)
CoM	Council of Ministers
DG	DEVCO Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (replaced by DG INTPA)
DG	INTPA Directorate-General for International Partnerships
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EC	European Commission
EEAS	European External Action Service
EFSD	European Fund for Sustainable Development
EIB	European Investment Bank
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
GNI	Gross National Income
MFA	Macro-financial assistance
MFF	Multiannual financial framework
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODA	Official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organisation

Key Findings

- ▶ The EU's response to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic has improved over the course of 2020, as the initial impression left on external observers was that of chaos and ineffectiveness, both internally and in the EU's external engagement.
- ▶ The EU's approach dramatically changed over the spring of 2020, resulting in a package of funding and a joint EU approach to external engagement, under the heading of "Team Europe".
- ▶ Even though "Team Europe" comprised existing plans for external engagement and funding for country partners and multilateral organisations, and included a wide variety of policy instruments, the response was still enough to push EU's net ODA to its historical high in 2020.
- ▶ The greatest increase in EU's net ODA for 2020 is found in direct budget support. In 2020, this instrument more than doubled in size compared to the previous year. While this is a positive development, which supports more agency on the part of the recipient countries, it is not clear whether this increased level of budget support will be maintained in the future.
- ▶ The EU relied on the "Team Europe" approach in its activities related to international development and in its social media engagement. While the analysis of the Twitter activity does show a greater focus on substantive issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, compared to earlier years, there is little interaction between the "EU bubble" and the external audiences that the EU may wish to reach. Rather than a tool of policy, the EU's social media are more indicative of the process in which the EU defines itself through presentation to external audiences.

Introduction

The European Union is often accused of being inward-focused. The sometimes arcane-looking procedures and the multiplicity of institutions certainly give the appearance of an organisation that is always trying to come to grips with its own structure, understand itself and explain itself to the outside. Given the EU's uniqueness - as more than an international organisation and less than a federation - these continuing processes in which the EU is structuring itself are hardly surprising. In its outward-facing policies and activities, the EU is similarly appearing as an organisation that wields power, economic, political, and normative,¹ but which is struggling to create a profile that fully matches its resources. Since 2020, and amid the global Covid-19 pandemic, the EU has launched a new approach to tackling global development problems, under the banner of "Team Europe". More than a funding initiative, this approach promises better, more coherent and coordinated approach to the EU's external action and particularly development spending.

As the EU is perhaps more than other organisations and states in a continuous effort to define itself, is this pandemic-era concept of "Team Europe" bringing anything new to the table, in terms of approach and in terms of support for developing countries? This report provides an overview of the EU's activities related to funding and supporting global action, by considering the financial and public image effects of this financial package and organisational approach.

In terms of external action that the EU can undertake, a process parallel to that of the recovery package was taking place, with the planned changes to the operation of externally oriented institutions and funding streams being accelerated. The Covid-19 pandemic, particularly at its onset, provided an opportunity for the EU's external action-oriented institutions (EEAS, the High Representative, DG International Partnerships, and DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations in particular) to present a new coordinated approach to development spending, and to present a package of funds that was promising to be more abundant and flexible enough to allow for unforeseen challenges posed by the pandemic to be tackled. The package and approach were announced on April 8, 2020, under the joint heading of "Team Europe", with an initial allocation of €15.6 billion funded by EU institutions, and a later assessment of the value at €46 billion, committed to by EU institutions and the Member States.

The summer of 2020 also saw the negotiations concerning EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the 2021-2027 period. The MFF negotiations over the EU's budget resulted in a new Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), also discussed as the Global Europe package. The NDICI aims to create a more unified approach to external action and spending and foresees a budget of €80 billion for the full period of the MFF, including 10% unallocated and to be used for emergencies. To this should be added €11.5 billion for humanitarian aid. This budget is a large proportion of the full amount of €123 billion funding dedicated to external action in the MFF. The full budget for the period up to 2027 is over €1 trillion, with an additional €800 billion in the Covid-19 recovery fund, "Next Generation EU". Set out amid a global pandemic of Covid-19, these plans are ambitious in terms of spending and in terms of a changing and more coordinated face that the EU presents to its external partners.

The core finding of this report is that the EU's Covid-19 external intervention was above all else – very much indicative of the way in which the EU deals with its external engagement. The plans put forward were seen as delayed, and mostly oriented towards the EU's broader neighbourhood. Additionally, they were clearly a sped-up and repackaged version of the EU's existing plans prior to the pandemic. This report also considers EU's social media activity related to external action and development support – and finds that this activity is far more oriented towards an internal audience and supports the EU's own institutional development and legitimising the EU's further foray into a policy area normally reserved for its member states. And yet, some clear positives have emerged as well: the EU increased its development spending, accompanied by a stark change in the mode of spending, with greater funding provided to direct budget support for ODA countries, which should support their governments' autonomy and capacity.

How does the EU engage with the rest of the world?

Even as it is most often seen as an international organisation, the EU is able to represent itself and its Member States (MS) on the global stage in multiple configurations. EU policy and activities are usually classified based on the extent to which the EU and the MS are required to cooperate in decision-making. These modes of decision-making can be understood as a continuum, with policy areas with sole EU policy-making power at one, and those with MS-only policy making power at the other. In between, we find various areas in which EU MS coordinate among themselves, areas in which policy and legislation are set through joint decision-making of the EU's supranational institutions and those that represent the MS. Though foreign policy and other kinds of external engagement have traditionally been reserved for the MS, the EU has been taking on an increasing role in these areas, and particularly since the 1999 creation of the post of the EU High Representative for the common foreign and security policy, which was further enhanced in scope in 2009's Lisbon Treaty. Engagement with third countries and other international and regional organisations thus comes in many forms – and those tend to have different levels of involvement of EU institutions and different routes for funding.

Trade policy. The EU negotiates on behalf of its Member States and represents the Union at the World Trade Organisation. Trade policy has historically also been used to make arrangements with developing countries under the Cotonou and Lomé conventions.

EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy. Here, internal and external politics collide. The area has two parallel aims, to prepare the process of entry of new member states, and to direct funding and organise the relationship with the neighbouring countries that are unlikely to join the EU. In essence, this is an area for the EU to manage its borders. The EU action in this area is driven by the Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. Enlargement and neighbourhood policy encompasses EU entry negotiations, signing of association agreements, pre-accession funding. Most of the decision-making is shared by the EU institutions and the MS.

ODA spending + Directorate General for International Partnerships

In terms of development assistance, the EU is one of the top donors to developing countries, coming in third place by USD value of funding, after United States and Germany. Combined, the EU and its member states form the largest bloc of ODA donors. The work of the EU in these policy domains traditionally focussed on countries in its own neighbourhood, or the former colonies with which the EU Member States were keen to maintain strong political and economic ties. The EU also takes part in multilateral cooperation via its international partnership mechanisms. The EU set up a series of arrangements to support trade, financial flows, and aid and assistance with the countries in Europe/Eurasia and Northern Africa, the specific features varying by region and by membership prospects. Apart from trade, the EU shares competences in this area with the MS.

Military and civilian missions

In recent years, the EU has engaged in military and civilian missions in areas of armed conflict and other forms of reduced security. Some examples include EU's rule of law mission in Kosovo (EULEX), military force in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR), naval presence off the coast of Somalia (EUNAVFOR), and many others. These missions are typically intergovernmental, i.e., depend on the MS for deployment and core mission objectives. However, as they also rely on operational and budgetary support from EU institutions and EU Delegations, there has been some dilution of their intergovernmental nature. In addition to these missions, EU's influence is strongly felt in activities like mediation support and support for peace processes (particularly with regard to support for the work of any NGOs that work on civic issues, gender equality, and similar).

Asylum and borders policy

The EU is able to set standards for asylum and border policy, particularly after the incorporation of the Schengen Agreement into the EU structure in the Amsterdam Treaty (1997). Any EU legislation in these areas is part of the "Area of Freedom, Security and Justice" bloc of policies and passed via the ordinary legislative procedure i.e., requiring agreement of the European Parliament (EP) and the Council of Ministers.

EEAS and EU Delegations

Established in 2011, the European External Action Service was envisioned as serving in the role of the EU's diplomatic arm and supporting the work of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and any external action decided on by the EC or the CoM. The EEAS is in charge of EU Delegations (~EU embassies) in third countries. The EEAS staff is either directly employed by the EU, as some have joined from previous EC and CoM offices, or relies on diplomatic staff seconded by the foreign ministries of the MS.

EU's Covid-19 Response

In a variety of crises over its history, the EU institutions and Member States tended to settle on a joint approach. Some of this has to do with the nature of the challenges, as the more serious ones also tend to be external and affecting more than a handful of the EU's members. The financial crises of the 1970s and 1980s yielded the Exchange Rate Mechanism and later the common currency, the environmental challenges of the 1980s made it clear that responses to environmental degradation needed to be cross-national, the terrorist attacks in New York, Madrid, and London in 2004 in 2005 set off a flurry of activity related to joint security and coordination, and the crisis of the Euro in the 2000s resulted in the Fiscal Compact. Notably, the migration towards the EU that dramatically peaked in 2015 made a joint approach to regulating immigration and asylum policy untenable - but it did push the EU and the Member States into further securitisation of migration, strengthening the joint approaches that focused on security missions in the Mediterranean and support for regimes that were willing to stop migration flows towards Europe. While the overall benefits of these joint approaches are matters of debate, and it is likely that at least some of these developments were normatively problematic,² the strengthening of the community and EU institutions has followed each of these critical junctures. At first, the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing crisis did not appear to have the same institution- and solidarity-building effect.

The EU did not wait too long to act on the news of the Covid-19 outbreak in China in early 2020. The first activity the EU reports in its Covid-19 action timeline³ concerns the opening of an alert notification on the Early Warning and Response System⁴ on January 9th, 2020 – weeks before the first case of Covid-19 was found in the EU. In January, repatriation of the EU citizens in Wuhan (China) started via the EU Civil Protection Mechanism,⁵ and the first lines of funding were made available for research on coronaviruses via Horizon 2020. Even as these first reactions took place fairly early in the pandemic, the following month saw relatively little activity. The European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen only established a "coronavirus response team" on March 2nd, and additional funding was directed towards dealing with the virus and its economic consequences as March progressed. The first month of the pandemic appeared chaotic, both in terms of domestic and in terms of external activity.

For the most part, the initial response was decidedly home-oriented. However, this was certainly not seen as sufficient as the EU countries found themselves at the centre of the pandemic and were making decisions with little to no coordination from the EU. Some of this inaction relates to the EU not having the right to make decisions on public health, as this is solely in the domain of the Member States. The EU does have decision-making rights on matters related to cross-border economic activity in the EU, and it was soon clear that this too was at stake. Even so, the EU Member States proved to be divided on increasing the EU's power to issue bonds and employ other means of public borrowing at EU-level with shared responsibility for the debt and distribute the proceeds to its Member States that were in the direst situations, like Italy and Spain.⁶

Both the external and domestic policies were affected in the early weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic, and both had been insufficient at the time. When the Covid-19 pandemic struck, the scale of the crisis resulted in initial chaos in EU institutions and Member State governments, with community solutions to problems like personal protective equipment taking a back seat. However, the EU collected itself fairly soon, both in terms of internal and external responses - and again, a crisis proved to be an opportunity. The EU's own timeline reports relatively little in terms of direct external action related to Covid-19 until the end of March 2020, with the focus clearly being on steadying the EU's economy and supporting various routes for joint action of the EU Member States, including measures for ensuring the continuation of trade flows within the EU, setting up the EU's strategic stockpile of medical equipment, and adding flexibility to the use of state aid to economic actors.

There was much discussion at the time of the start of the pandemic about the appropriate role for the EU – and most of the commentators, if not the Member State governments agreed that the EU should be doing more, both internally and externally, with external relations being disproportionately affected as the EU's inactivity was seen as contributing to increasing great power competition.⁷ The EU itself was attempting to take on a greater role in global affairs: when she came into office as the new European Commission President in 2019, Ursula von der Leyen proclaimed that hers would be a “geopolitical” Commission. “A stronger Europe in the world” was set as one of six Commission priorities for the 2019-2024 period.⁸

Team Europe: Initially Announced Funding (April 8, 2020)

Total value: €15.6 billion, of which €9.09 billion to the following:

EU neighbourhood: €3.07 billion, of which

- ▶ €2.1 billion for the southern partners (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia)
- ▶ €962 million for the eastern partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine)
- ▶ €800 million for Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia) and Turkey.

EFSD guarantees for Africa: €1.42 billion

Africa: €2.06 billion (excluding Northern Africa)

Asia and Pacific: €1.22 billion

ACP region: €291 million

Latin America and the Caribbean: €918 million

EU Overseas Countries and Territories: €111 million

EU's statement of its geopolitical role

"The European Union has a unique asset in global affairs, beyond its economic and financial strength: we are an unparalleled 'convening power'; we are at the centre of a global network of alliances; we are a pillar of the multilateral system; we can rally broad coalitions in support of a common cause; and we know how to bring regional powers and rival nations around the same table."

European Commission, 2020. State of the Union 2020; The von der Leyen Commission: One year on. (p. 8) https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/von-der-leyen-commission-one-year-on_en.pdf (Accessed on July 5, 2021).

A change in how development policy is done was to be expected, particularly as the EU's institutions working in that area have been multiple, and sometimes in a relatively awkward position managing direct relationships with countries where EU delegations are present.⁹ The Delegation itself would be staffed and run by the EEAS. However, the EEAS would have relatively little influence on ODA funding, which would have gone through the European Development Fund (EDF) and the relevant Directorates General (DGs). Ideally, the planning and management would have included all the relevant institutions, but coordination was difficult to achieve, with multiple types of activity, multiple sources of funding, and vastly differing and blurring lines of accountability for particular institutions.¹⁰ Coordination is not the only concern in EU's external activities, as the diffuse relationships and multiple strands of authority and funding also dilute the effectiveness of external action, and particularly the funding streams for international development, given the size of the EU's ODA budget. This was a particular concern in the EU's relationship with African countries, which the EU itself placed high on the list of priorities for the 2019-2024 period. The matter was also subject of Council Conclusions on the Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises in 2018, which called for a more coherent and holistic engagement by the EU.¹¹

In EU development policy, there have been few moments of change as significant as 2020, however, this change cannot be entirely attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic and crisis. Two developments in 2020 and later in the pandemic are of note. First, the EU presented a "Team Europe" approach in April 2020, promising a more coordinated approach to external activity across the EU's institutions, and particularly in international development, and in relation to crises and conflicts. Second, a new budgetary instrument was approved and came into force in June 2021, under the heading of Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-Global Europe). The latter had been planned and discussed in EU's institutions for several years, with the integration and coordination of development instruments into the NDICI-Global Europe had already been in legislative procedure in 2018.¹² Additionally, as the new multiannual financial framework was looming, 2020 was the focal year for this new approach to be put in place. If it had any impact on NDICI-Global Europe, the Covid-19 pandemic made the need for a joined and coherent approach to development funding more apparent.

In terms of direct response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the “Team Europe” approach and the related funding packages constituted the bulk of EU’s response to support developing countries. The “Team Europe” approach, as it was finally presented in the spring of 2020, promises “robust and targeted EU response to support partner countries’ efforts in tackling the coronavirus pandemic” and a financial package supported by “the EU, its Member States and financial institutions, in particular the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, to support partner countries and address their short-term needs, as well as the longer-term structural impacts on societies and the economy.”¹³

Team Europe: Funding distribution on April 8 2021

Team Europe = EU + Member States + EIB + EBRD

Total value: €46 billion, distributed across:

EU neighbourhood + Western Balkans + Turkey: €19.664 billion

Sub-Saharan Africa: €8.082 billion

Asia and Pacific: €3.181 billion

ACP region: €658 million

Latin America and the Caribbean: €2.969 billion

EU Overseas Countries and Territories: €627 million

Global: €7.537 billion (Source: see fn. 8)

Guarantees: €3.281 billion

The announcement set the value of the EU’s response to the challenge of Covid-19 across multiple external recipients at €15.6 billion. Some caveats apply: first, not all of the funding would count as ODA spending, as some may be provided to countries not on the ODA list; second, even the spending directed towards the developing countries would not necessarily be focused on the countries most in need, as the funding was also meant to support countries in the EU’s neighbourhood (Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, and Turkey); third, not all of the package would be in the form of direct transfers or programming-based activities, as at least a tenth of the total amount was to cover guarantees for loans by the European Fund for Sustainable Development.

Additionally, the EU's Q&A on its response to the pandemic notes that €5.2 billion of the package consists of loans from the European Investment Bank that were planned and will be accelerated.¹⁴ While this does make it seem like the EU is presenting a mere repackaging of its existing funding plans, the commitment to provide direct contributions to state budgets and to support research and healthcare across the funded countries is a new element and certainly a step in the right direction. The EU's announcement also included support for multilateral organisations such as the UN, the WHO, the Red Cross and the Red Crescent.

The EU proceeded to add financing instruments to the initially announced package, for example, by extending its macro-financial assistance to the ten neighbourhood countries to the tune of €3 billion,¹⁵ supporting humanitarian aid delivery,¹⁶ extending humanitarian support to countries in the Horn of Africa¹⁷ and to multilateral organisations working in multiple fragile settings.¹⁸ By the end of April 2020, the EU was citing a €20 billion value of its support package.¹⁹

In yet another calculation,²⁰ made exactly one year later, on April 8 2021, the EU, the Member States, the EIB and the EBRD jointly committed to almost €46 billion for the "Team Europe" external response to Covid-19. The European Commission's commitment in this calculation was set at €14.8, while the EIB and the EBRD made available €11.4 billion and €4.8 billion, respectively. By that point, one year after the initial package was announced, 73% of the committed funds had been spent.²¹ "Team Europe" package also includes the financing and support provided to the COVAX Facility²² that aims to deliver vaccines against Covid-19 to all countries and the people who need them. The EU joined COVAX in August 2020, with an initial contribution of €400 million in guarantees.²³ By August 2021, the EU boasted a contribution to COVAX of €3 billion.²⁴

By the summer of 2021, the EU's MFF for 2021-2027 was agreed, and the EU put in place the NDICI-Global Europe package, with a plan to dedicate €80 billion over the MFF period to supporting neighbouring and developing countries, with priority placed on civil society, green initiatives, human development, peace and security, sustainable development, innovation, and migration partnerships.²⁵ At that point, concerns about Covid-19, its impact, and the need to support public health in ODA-recipient countries, had already fallen by the wayside in medium-term planning for EU's development funding. However, the pandemic response may have brought about changes to how the EU spends its ODA funds, and the section below considers whether there have been any changes in these modalities of spending.

EU as an ODA Donor: Trends and Pandemic Impact

The EU is currently the world's third largest ODA donor, after United States and Germany. Together, the EU and its Member States form the world's largest ODA-donor bloc. In 2020, at the start of the pandemic, the EU announced a series of funding initiatives, as outlined in the previous section. How was this flurry of activity from April 2020 and up to the end of that year reflected in the EU's ODA statistics²⁶ – and what are the key changes that can be noted, when compared to 2019 and before?

As can be seen from Figure 1 below, the EU's net ODA contributions have been rising steadily, particularly in the last MFF (2013-2020). While there was a dip in 2019 compared to the previous year, in 2020, the EU's net ODA surpassed \$27 billion. The EU activity here was clearly anticyclical, with funds increasing at a time when a global crisis was looming and developing countries were facing negative external shocks to their economies. The funding commitments announced through the various "Team Europe" initiatives did translate into an increase in ODA funding, and pushed the EU's net ODA for 2020 beyond the previous maximum, reached in 2016.

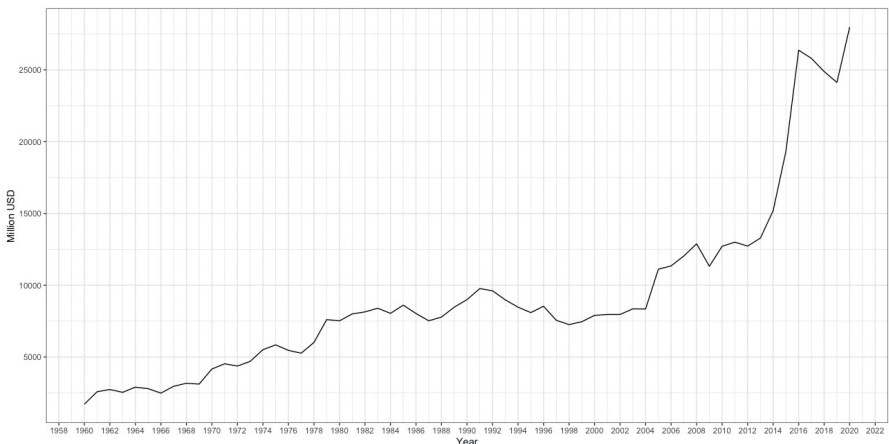


Figure 1. EU net ODA, 1960-2020. Data source: OECD (2022), Distribution of net ODA (indicator). doi: 10.1787/2334182b-en (Accessed on 10 April 2022)

The sections above showed the distribution of EU's "Team Europe" approach and funding package, which was split by global regions, and only loosely correlating with ODA-eligible funding. As the first year of the pandemic saw EU's commitment to spending to support the fight against Covid and economic recovery, and a related increase in EU's new ODA, was this of clear benefit to receiving countries? This matter is particularly important, as the EU and its MS have been accused of increasing funding to ODA-eligible but locally disbursed activities, such as funds for refugees or students in the donor country.²⁷ To answer that question, I turn to the OECD's data on ODA, disaggregated by type of aid, and focusing on the main areas of section I.A. Bilateral Official Development Assistance. As shown in the Figure 2 below, the increases in EU's commitments were also translated into bilateral ODA. Figure 2 shows year-on-year comparison across eight subsections of bilateral ODA (excluding debt relief to better focus on disbursements): 1) budget support, 2) bilateral core contributions, pooled programmes and funds, 3) project-type interventions, 4) experts and technical assistance, 5) scholarships and student costs in donor countries, 6) other administrative costs, 7) other in-donor expenditures, and 8) recoveries on bilateral ODA grants/negative commitments. The data are shown for the 2015-2020 period, which is also the time of fairly consistent increases in EU's ODA.

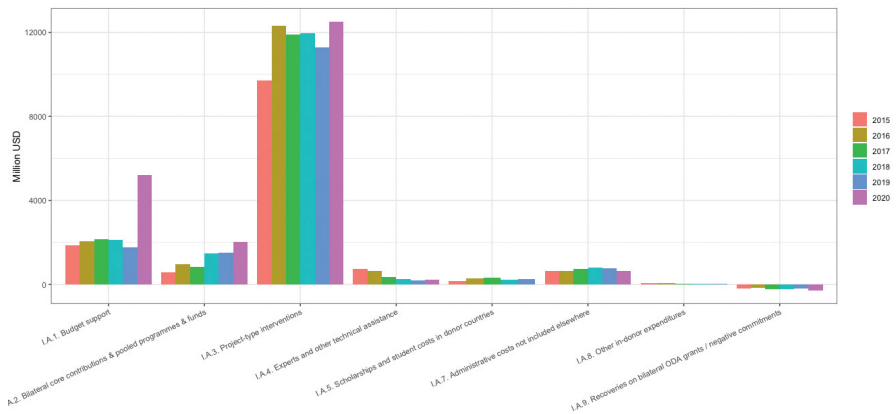


Figure 2. EU bilateral ODA, some sections. Data source: OECD (2022), Distribution of net ODA (indicator). doi: 10.1787/2334182b-en (Accessed on 10 April 2022)

EU's ODA funds in 2020 saw increases in bilateral core contributions, and programme-based funding. These increases, however, have not been as dramatic as the increase in budget support. For direct budget support, the comparison between 2020 and the previous years is stark: from holding steady at around \$2 billion between 2015 and 2019, this form of ODA more than doubled in size in 2020. Such an increase is primarily good news – with direct support for the budgets, the recipient countries have more control over assistance provided. For its part, the EU does place some conditions on receipt of direct budget support: “relevant and credible national or sector strategies, policies, and/or reforms; stability-focused economic policies; a relevant and credible plan to improve public financial management and domestic revenue mobilisation; budget oversight and publicly available budget information.”²⁸ From the point of view of EU accountability for spending, it is worthwhile asking whether such a dramatic increase has been accompanied by an increase in resources provided for developing partnerships and planning with the recipient countries, particularly as the EU delegations reported increased political, macroeconomic, and developmental risk in the countries that receive EU budget support.²⁹ It does remain to be seen whether this high level of budget support will continue in the future.

Team Europe on Twitter: Reaching Out to Whom?

While examining the structure of EU's ODA spending is a useful way to understand how this development funding changed during the Covid-19 pandemic, these data alone are not sufficient to examine how the EU institutions used the new approach to external activity. When the EU's global response to the pandemic was launched the increased funding was accompanied by a public facing campaign – "Team Europe" was to be a package of funding but also a change in how the EU conducts itself in external relations. The focus was to be on cooperation and cohesion across EU institutions, and this primarily appeared to be a tool for internal institutional needs.

The EU's institutions have a wide-ranging social media presence. The institutions themselves and the individual high-level officials maintain and curate accounts, and all have a presence on Twitter. Since the "Team Europe" approach has been announced, the institutions and individual officials have used the #TeamEurope hashtag in thousands of tweets that concern all facets of EU's external engagement. The institutions have also interacted with one another, and with other Twitter users, and the data from these tweets and interactions can be used to better understand how the "Team Europe" approach is used by EU institutions and particularly how it is used in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. As the face of EU's diplomacy, the EEAS would have been at the centre of these efforts to create a shared approach.

The data provided by Twitter can be useful for considering how this-outward facing approach was handled, and what kind of uptake it found among Twitter users. Additionally, analysing and visualising the texts of tweets provides an insight into the key messages that the institutions wanted to get across. The main concern here is to do with the outward- vs inward-facing nature of these public engagements. Are the activities during the pandemic primarily contributing to the EU's own understanding of itself? Alternatively, are these tweets reaching a wider audience and contributing to a better external understanding of what the EU is doing to support pandemic relief and recovery outwith its borders.

With these broad aims in mind, the analysis below considers the following sets of questions:

- 1) As the main external affairs institutions of the EU, how is the EEAS approaching the public campaign on "Team Europe"? Are their tweets during the pandemic different in any way from those posted prior to the start of the pandemic? Are there any coherent and recognizable Covid-19-related themes in their social media?

- 2) What are the main topics of tweets that contain the #Team Europe hashtag? Are any topical and policy areas more often publicised than others? How does Covid-19 feature in the tweets?

These questions can be answered by treating the tweet texts as data and subjecting their content to visual representation and topic modelling. The latter class of models fall at the intersection of natural language processing, content analysis, and classical statistical analysis.³⁰ In these models, units of text are compared, and co-occurring words are clustered together. The number of these clusters-topics (k) is pre-set by the analyst, based on model performance at various values of k. The model identifies the top words in each of the topics, both in terms of frequency and in terms of uniqueness. The results of these models can be further analysed alongside any recorded metadata, assessing the extent to which a particular topic correlates with a value of the text's metadata.

Here, the texts of tweets are subjected to topic modelling, and key topics are identified; the tweets have some metadata, such as date (pre-pandemic or during-pandemic) or whether they were sent by any of the EU's institutions. Importantly, this methodology allows for an assessment of how the tweet topics changed over time.

The data have been collected by relying on Twitter's academic research access policy and consist of the following:

- Texts of all tweets posted by the EEAS Twitter account up to the end of 2020 (total of 83059 tweets).
- Texts of all tweets using the #TeamEurope hashtag (total of 230280 tweets)³¹

The EEAS Twitter account has been active since 2010 and has been primarily dedicated to publicising EEAS and High Representative activities. With the Covid-19 emergency and the new approach (Team Europe) and new funding mechanisms (NDICI/Global Europe), it could have been expected to alter this public-facing image to represent this shift in priorities and overall outlook. However, the topic models show very little in terms of change in content of these public-facing activities.

Models estimated with 10, 15, 20, and 30 topics, for all tweets since 2010, show the issues that the EEAS is dealing with, with no unexpected results. When a smaller number of topics is assumed in the model, some clear topics emerge on EU's global partnerships (e.g., with UN, UNHCR), funding for development and humanitarian aid, press statements and appearances of the High Representative, and the EU's Civil Protection Mechanism engaging in cases of natural disasters, primarily earthquakes. In the 15-topic model, some additional coherent topics emerge in addition to those found in the smaller model, such as women's rights and gender equality, and peace and security in the context of EU missions. Topics on children/family, EU institutions, and multilateralism (mentioning the African Union, UN, meetings) appear in the 20-topic model. The 30-topic model introduces no new coherent topics. None of the topics are found to be strongly correlated with the period after the World Health Organisation announced that the Covid-19 crisis is in fact a global pandemic on March 11th, 2020.

Some Covid-related issues do appear when the tweets from 2020 are considered on their own, with words "coronavirus", "impact", "need" and "#strongertogether" co-appearing in the tweets from 2020. A comparison of 2019 and 2020 does not show that the coronavirus-related topics significantly affect what the EEAS is tweeting about.

A clear finding that is coming from both the topical analysis and the visual presentation of the tweet texts is that this public-facing activity is conducted at a very high level. Particular partner or aid recipient countries appear only insofar as they are at the forefront of high-level activity, such as High Representative visits, meetings, summits. Most of the institutions with which the EEAS is communicating are EU's own institutions, and persons most often mentioned are the High Representatives and the Commissioners. In 2020, this trend continues, and the one issue that does stand out in the most frequently used terms is that the EEAS tweets appear to be engaging with more of the EU missions, and occasionally with the Member State foreign ministries.

EU's Development Spending, External Action, and Covid: Two Years On

After two years of Covid-driven politics in the EU, an assessment of the EU's response in external action and particularly development funding has to ask whether there are any signs that the pandemic response was in some way transformative for how the EU handles itself on the global stage. Based on the changes to EU's ODA funding and the way that the EU crafted its response to the pandemic, it is likely that the Covid-19 pandemic was no more than catalyst for impending changes.

With the selection of Ursula von der Leyen as EC President in 2019, and her focus on external relations and EU as a global actor, some of the rebranding of EU institutions and aggregation of external development and partnerships funding under the same (Commission-driven) chapeau was already being planned. The process was more than rebranding for the sake of rebranding, as EU external activities were in fact suffering from a lack of coordination and a lack of understanding of which EU institutions to talk to about particular types of projects and partnerships. However, it was also an opportunity for the EU to reconstruct and adapt its own image, trying to become more coordinated by presenting itself as such.

The EU's focus on its own institutional development has been present as a constant component of external-facing activities in the pandemic and its immediate aftermath. Not only is the EU's own presentation of its development funding accentuating this institution-building aspect,³³ but it is also seen in the way that the EU's institutions approach the public. The assessment of the tweets by the EEAS and that had the "Team Europe" hashtag shows that the communication is focused on the EU's own institutions, and looks to link its often-disparate parts – the European Commission, the Directorates General, the High Representative, the EEAS, the EU diplomatic missions.

Apart from these institutional concerns, the increase in EU's funding for international partnerships, external action, development, peace and mediation support constitutes good news, particularly as the 2020 increase in net ODA also featured a jump in direct budgetary support for developing countries. However, as noted by the CONCORD AidWatch report, these increases in funding and the package adopted in the MFF should not prevent consideration of how the EU goes about spending the aid that it is committing to.³⁴

However, the pandemic was significant as its urgency allowed for faster decision-making on the availability of non-earmarked funds, which could be directed towards pandemic recovery. Similarly, publicising the organisational improvements and presenting the EU institutions as working with more coordination as "Team Europe" was seen as both an improved way of working, and a branding campaign that could put the EU forward as a global actor that supports efforts to stymie the pandemic and act to counteract its economic effects. So much of what the EU planned was in the public-facing aspects of the "Global Europe" set of funding mechanisms planned in the MFF for 2020-2027 and in the "Team Europe" approach – to the extent that that the DG DEVCO's Strategic Plan for 2020-2024 mentions the branding as particular endeavour to be undertaken. Covid-19 crisis seems to have been, again, a situation of the EU acting and, in this process, constituting itself, solidifying its own institutions and simultaneously building an image of itself in the eyes of its external interlocutors.

Selection of Relevant EU Documents

Council conclusions on Team Europe Global Response to COVID-19

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44347/team-europe-ccs-200608.pdf>

HIGH REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNION FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND SECURITY POLICY. JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS: Communication on the Global EU response to COVID-19 (Brussels, 8.4.2020 JOIN(2020) 11 final) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0011&from=EN>

Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development - DG DEVCO. Strategic Plan 2020-2024. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/devco_sp_2020_2024_en.pdf

DECISION (EU) 2020/701 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 25 May 2020 on providing macro-financial assistance to enlargement and neighbourhood partners in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020D0701&from=EN>

COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS. Drawing the early lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic. Brussels, 15.6.2021 COM(2021) 380 final

<https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication150621.pdf>

Timeline of EU Action

https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/timeline-eu-action_en

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- ² See for example Norman, Kelsey P., and Nicholas R. Micinski. 2022. "The European Union's Migration Management Aid: Developing Democracies or Supporting Authoritarianism?" *International Migration*.
- ³ Timeline of EU Action. https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/timeline-eu-action_en (Accessed on March 22, 2022).
- ⁴ The Early Warning and Response System is part of the EU's European Center for Disease Prevention and Control, and is intended to provide a way for EU and Member State public health bodies to confidentially share information on public health threats.
- ⁵ Established in 2001, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism is a coordinating body of EU Member States and 8 non-EU states that acts to prepare responses, and to act in support of relief efforts in cases of natural disasters.
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- ⁷ See, for instance Koenig, Nicole and Anna Stahl. 2020. How the coronavirus pandemic affects the EU's geopolitical agenda. Jacques Delors Centre, Hertie School. https://www.hertie-school.org/fileadmin/20200424_EU_Solidarity_Koenig_Stahl.pdf (Accessed on July 5, 2021).
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- ⁹ See in particular the special issue of the *European Foreign Affairs review*: Chaban, Natalia and Sonia Lucarelli. 2021. Reassessing External Images of the EU: Evolving Narratives in Times of Crisis. *European Foreign Affairs Review*. Vol. 26 (1); Tomat, Stefano. 2021. EU Foreign Policy Coherence in Times of Crises: The Integrated Approach. *European Foreign Affairs Review*. Vol. 26 (1); Delphin, Herve. 2021. Above the Fog and the Fury: EU Strategic Policy Planning and the EU's Future in Times of Global Uncertainty. *European Foreign Affairs Review*. Vol. 26 (1).
- ¹⁰ For issues concerning accountability and multiplication of actors in EU external policies, see Moser, Carolyn. 2020. *Accountability in EU Security and Defence: The Law and Practice of Peacebuilding*. Oxford: Oxford.
- ¹¹ Council of the European Union. 2018. Council Conclusions on the Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises. 5413/18. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5413-2018-INIT/en/pdf> (Accessed on July 5 2021).
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- ¹³ European Commission and High Representative Press release on "Coronavirus: EU global response to fight the pandemic", April 8, 2020. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_604 (Accessed on March 2 2022).
- ¹⁴ See European Commission, Q&A: Global EU response to the coronavirus pandemic, April 8, 2020. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_606 (Accessed on March 3 2022)
- ¹⁵ EU's macro-financial assistance is intended to support countries that are facing a balance of payment crisis and is only available to countries already receiving IMF financing. See more at EU's summary of Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA) to non-EU partner countries at https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/international-economic-relations/macro-financial-assistance-mfa-non-eu-partner-countries_en (Accessed on April 1, 2022). The countries receiving MFA in April 2020 were Albania (€180 million), Bosnia and Herzegovina (€250 million), Georgia (€150 million), Jordan (€200 million), Kosovo (€100 million), the Moldova (€100 million), Montenegro (€60 million), North Macedonia (€160 million), Tunisia (€600 million) and Ukraine (€1.2 billion) (European Commission Press Release, 22 April 2020, at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_716).
- ¹⁶ European Commission Press release, June 24, 2020, Coronavirus response: Team Europe support to Sudan through EU Humanitarian Air Bridge flight. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1180 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_905 (Accessed on February 15, 2022).
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- ¹⁸ European Commission Press release, May 20, Coronavirus global response: EU allocates additional €50 million in humanitarian aid. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_905 (Accessed on February 15, 2022).
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- ²⁰ European Commission, Directorate General for International Partnerships. 2021. Team Europe external response to COVID-19 (up to 8 April 2021). https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/20210401-team-europe-response-to-covid_en.pdf.pdf (Accessed on December 1 2021).
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- ²² See more at <https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator/covax> (Accessed on March 22, 2022).
- ²³ European Commission Press Release. August 31, 2020, Coronavirus Global Response: Commission joins the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access Facility (COVAX). https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1540 (Accessed on February 17, 2022).

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³³ See European Commission, March 17, 2022. The new 'NDICI – Global Europe' (2021-2027). https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/new-%E2%80%98ndici-global-europe%E2%80%99-2021-2027_en (Accessed on March 25, 2022), where the key summary page for the new development funding instrument lists the following as a key feature: "AN INSTRUMENT TO FOSTER FURTHER INTER INSTITUTIONAL SYNERGY: To achieve our goals, we are mobilising the full toolbox of the EU's external action. The EEAS, responsible of the EU foreign policy, is working even closer with the European Commission, in particular with DG International Partnerships (DG INTPA), DG European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) and the Service for the Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) and with our Delegations around the world, as well as with our Member States, their cooperation agencies and EU financial institutions, particularly under the EFSD+, in a 'Team Europe' approach."

³⁴ CONCORD – European Confederation of Relief and Development NGOs. 2021. Aidwatch Report 2021; A geopolitical Commission: building partnerships or playing politics? <https://aidwatch.concordeurope.org/2021-report/> (Accessed on November 30, 2021).

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