



Wilfried  
**Martens Centre**  
for European Studies

# The Future of European Development Cooperation: A Centre–Right Perspective

Peter Hefele, in collaboration with Samuel Crooks



## Summary

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When combined, the EU and its member states rank as the second-largest donor of global development aid. Yet, there is hardly any public debate about the effectiveness, or even political legitimacy, of this policy field. The competition with ‘new’ donors such as China and India has raised fundamental questions about whether the concept of development as it has been pursued over the last 60 years, should undergo a complete revision and whether the traditional understanding of development itself needs to be abandoned.

This brief develops a new conceptual framework from a centre–right perspective to critically review current policies and suggest new approaches. If the established system continues, we will see a further delegitimation of this important field of international cooperation and a reduction in the global influence of the EU.

**Keywords** Development aid – International cooperation – EU – Christian Democracy



# Introduction

In most OECD countries, expenditures for development cooperation (DC)<sup>1</sup> rank among the fifth largest items in the public budget. The EU is no exception. Around 6.5% (€79.5 billion) of its 2021–7 budget is allocated to the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, making DC the fourth-largest budget item after agriculture, regional development and research.<sup>2</sup> On a global scale, the EU (including its member states) ranks second, after the US, in terms of bilateral and multilateral DC allocations, and contributes a third of the total net flows from OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, criticism of the existing system of international aid, its rationales, its instruments and its results has increased; the OECD has even called for a fundamental revision of the system.<sup>4</sup> The drivers behind this critical review are manifold and often affected by the political background. The arguments range from accusations of colonialism and racism to claims that aid perpetuates dependency structures, and from concerns over rising competition from new donors to apprehension regarding apparent failures in achieving European geostrategic interests.<sup>5</sup>

This policy brief will analyse the current status of the DC<sup>6</sup> implemented by the EU. It will focus on the Union's instruments and only include the member states' activities when necessary.<sup>7</sup> The following questions guide the approach in this brief:

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<sup>1</sup> Development cooperation within the EU and its neighbourhood (e.g. via the European Neighbourhood Policy, see *European Commission, 'European Neighbourhood Policy' (2023)*) is not part of this analysis, even though many of the characteristics of external development policy can also be found here.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, *Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027 (in Commitments) – Current Prices* (22 January 2021), 6.

<sup>3</sup> OECD, 'Statistics on Resource Flows to Developing Countries: Total Net Flows by DAC Country' (2022), authors' own calculations.

<sup>4</sup> OECD, *Development Co-operation Report 2023: Debating the Aid System* (Paris, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> See S. Delputte and J. Orbie, 'Paradigm Shift or Reinventing the Wheel? Towards a Research Agenda on Change and Continuity in EU Development', *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 16/2 (2020); J. Orbie, 'International Development', in H. Wallace et al. *Policy-Making in the European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> We exclude all kinds of emergency and disaster aid from our argumentation, even if this is an overlapping area both financially and in practical terms.

<sup>7</sup> The importance of the EU member countries in the official development assistance (ODA) system can hardly be underestimated, with Germany providing \$33.3 billion in ODA (2021) and France \$15.5 billion (2021). See OECD, 'Statistics on Resource Flows to Developing Countries' (a table of the DAC members' ODA in 2021 on a grant-equivalent basis). If not otherwise stated, the definitions and calculations of the OECD DAC systems will be used, as they provide the most comprehensive and comparable global data set.



- What is the specific added value of *European DC*, in addition to or in contrast to that from the EU member states?
- Is development aid still a *valid policy concept* to address the interests of the EU, the interests of the recipient countries, and global challenges, such as climate change? Or should it be abandoned to pave the way for new approaches?
- What should and could be *realistic objectives* for future European DC?
- Is the *institutional setting* within the current constitutional framework still able to undergo the necessary transformations?
- And how can a *revised concept of development* be derived from the general principles of centre–right politics?

This brief goes beyond the usual criticism of development policy, which often remains bound to traditional concepts of ‘development’, and looks at the political and ethical levels. The subject will be approached from a centre–right and Christian Democratic perspective. Such an attempt requires a thorough reflection on the theoretical and ethical assumptions about DC and an unbiased learning of lessons from decades of (mostly) disappointing experiences in this policy field. The objective is to establish a set of fundamental criteria for rethinking the basis of DC—or what comes after it. As explained in Section 4, the alternative, coherent centre–right foundation for this policy field is rather new in comparison to existing leftist positions.

## The evolution of European DC

The evolution of a genuine European development policy (EDP) goes back to the origins of the EU/European Community.<sup>8</sup> However, the definition of development policy as defined by the EU has changed over time. Institutional settings within the EU and its ecosystem of implementing agencies (both state and non-state) have altered, reflecting shifting policy priorities, increasing inter-institutional competition and variations in the concepts applied. For our conceptual consideration, we use a broad understanding of development policy, which goes beyond the OECD DAC definition and includes, for example, private and corporate activities.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> V. Dimier, *The Invention of a European Development Aid Bureaucracy: Recycling Empire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> We use here the extended definition of DC given in J. A. Alonso and J. Glennie, ‘*What is Development Cooperation?*’, *ECOSOC Development Cooperation Forum* (2015).



There are several rules and regulations in the treaties of the EU which have provided the constitutional basis for the EU's actions in the field, as well as for those of the member states.<sup>10</sup> Having grown out of the challenges of decolonisation in the 1960s, DC has gone through various phases,<sup>11</sup> swinging between being an autonomous, self-contained policy area and having a more auxiliary role. The constitutional establishment of the specific policy field had already been laid in the Treaty Establishing the European Community in 1957, which states in Title XX that the activities of the Community in this field shall be extended to a 'community policy in the sphere of development cooperation'.

It is not only the budget allocation that has significantly increased over recent decades.<sup>12</sup> Other dimensions, particularly the rationale behind cooperation, the instruments used and the degree of cohesion with other policy fields, have undergone significant changes. Yet, until the last decade, poverty reduction through economic growth set the paradigm. The introduction of the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) led to a wider understanding of the term 'development'. This, however, came at the price of conceptual diffusion and the instrumentalisation of the Union's external policy. It is no surprise that the very existence of this policy field is increasingly being questioned (see below).

## A paradigmatic shift in development policy?

In analysing the genesis and specificity of EDP, one should not allow oneself to be confused by the constant efforts to reframe and rename policy actions and instruments. EDP has changed in substance to a lesser degree.<sup>13</sup> The transformations of EDP can often be considered 'old wine in new bottles', leaving fundamental and often hidden paradigms and agendas untouched. Many failures in this policy field have been foreseeable and yet inevitably repeated as underlying assumptions have not been honestly questioned. Before attempting to develop elements of a new paradigm for EDP from a conservative and Christian Democratic perspective,

<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the evolution of EDP, see J. Bergmann et al., 'The Evolution of the EU's Development Policy: Turning Full Circle', *European Foreign Affairs Review* 24/4 (2019).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 551 and Table 1.

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>13</sup> Orbie, 'International Development', 425.



we will look at the established narratives of EDP as they have developed since the end of the 1950s.

## EDP: a unique policy field?

Despite extensive literature on the subject, the core paradigm of EDP defies a concise answer beyond the vague notion of poverty reduction. This surprising yet unhelpful situation is the result of at least three factors:

- The terms used to define concepts of development policy, such as ‘development’, ‘partnership’, ‘ownership’ and ‘responsibility’, are unclear (see below). Furthermore, the labelling of ‘objectives’, ‘strategies’ and so on is often confusing and lacks logical or categorical consistency.
- EDP has repeatedly become a servant of other policy objectives and approaches and has been captured by their narratives and motivations. Finding a distinct ‘unique selling point’ for development policy is almost impossible.
- The underlying ethical assumptions and motives have always been taken for granted by politicians and the ‘development complex’. But in reality, a public consensus does not exist, nor are the argumentation and practical consequences of these assumptions and motives free from inherent contradictions and paradoxes.

Despite this unsatisfying situation, EDP still benefits from a broad, cross-party consensus. In contrast to other policy fields, fierce debates are rare.<sup>14</sup> This surprising fact requires some explanation, given the far-reaching implications of EDP for budget distribution and its impacts on the EU’s foreign relations.

A tentative explanation draws on the following characteristics of development policy:

- Development policy is probably one of the most outstanding examples of the concept of ‘normative power’,<sup>15</sup> which the EU has claimed to support

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<sup>14</sup> The position of the majority of European voters can be described as ‘tacit acquiescence’ on development policy as it has never been an issue of broader public debate. A striking example is the (non-) debate after the disastrous withdrawal of Western countries from Afghanistan in 2021. The necessary investigation of the withdrawal’s circumstances was delegated to long-term parliamentary commissions, a well-known way to avoid any public debate about what went wrong, with the sole purpose of diffusing political responsibilities.

<sup>15</sup> On the concept of normative power see *European Union External Action Service*, ‘Critically Assess and Analyse the Notion that the EU is a Normative Power’ (24 November 2016).



for decades. Questioning the ethical and political rationale behind this assumption would require a thorough debate on the identity of the Union itself.

- Hardly any other policy field is more super-charged with moral reasoning, which makes the field almost immune to criticism. It would be political suicide for individuals or parties to (fundamentally) criticise concepts and actions on the ground.
- It is often forgotten or (deliberately?) ignored, that development policy is one of the most intensely lobbied policy areas, with a vast civil-society network backing (or often preventing) substantial changes to concepts and actions through the effective mobilisation of political pressure.

## Some reflections on the concept of ‘development’

Development policy has been criticised since its establishment in the 1950s by people from a range of different ideological backgrounds and with differing interests. The latest fundamental criticism of the concept of ‘development’ derives from the framework of postcolonial studies.<sup>16</sup> These authors correctly point out the Euro/Western-centric origin of the notion of development.<sup>17</sup> Asymmetric relations between donors and receivers, questionable generalisations on the historical development experiences of the North-Atlantic region, and a cultural and normative universalism—these factors, among others, have undoubtedly shaped the dominant perspective on development and the means by which it should be achieved.<sup>18</sup>

Even a short review of the various approaches to development provides no comprehensive consensus or precise definition. ‘Development policy encompasses all political, economic and social measures to help improve living conditions in developing countries in a sustainable way’.<sup>19</sup> This slim definition from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, which can be found in many other official documents, is not a definition in the strict sense. It is, rather, a vague description

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<sup>16</sup> For an overview see A. Ziai, ‘Postkoloniale Perspektiven auf “Entwicklung”’, *Peripherie* 30/120 (2010), 400.

<sup>17</sup> This exculpates any wrongdoing, such as bad governance, on the part of the donors, which cannot always be linked to the colonial heritage. For an African view, see T. Ayodele, T. A. Nolutshungu and C. K. Sunwabe, ‘African Perspectives on Aid: Foreign Assistance Will Not Pull Africa Out of Poverty’, Cato Institute, *Economic Development Bulletin no. 2* (14 September 2005).

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that ‘new’ donors, such as the People’s Republic of China, follow the same pattern of imposing an alien development model, despite, in the case of China, claiming to take a completely different approach to that of Western countries. See P. Stein and E. Uddhammar, *China in Africa: The Role of Trade, Investments, and Loans Amidst Shifting Geopolitical Ambitions*, Observer Research Foundation Occasional Paper (14 August 2023).

<sup>19</sup> *Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation*, ‘Development Policy’ (2023).



of what is globally accepted as the lowest common denominator. The approach to the SDGs is even less precise—and at the same time more ambitious: They ‘aim to transform our world. They are a call to action to end poverty and inequality, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy health, justice and prosperity. It is critical that no one is left behind’.<sup>20</sup> This obscure and wordy ‘policy container’ with myriad sub-goals is a political wish list rather than coherent guidance. It can therefore be predicted that the SDGs will largely fail to meet their own criteria, as did their precursor, the MDGs.<sup>21</sup>

Choosing such an all-encompassing approach may serve the political consensus from a short-term perspective. But in the long term, a less-ambitious, more-focused approach would better serve the objectives of development policy.<sup>22</sup>

Even the most recent, innovative approaches fail to adequately address the difficulties mentioned above. They do not succeed in overcoming donor organisations’ and receivers’ often incompatible objectives and underlying norms. Even with the best intentions, asymmetric relations remain (despite all pledges of partnership); major factors outside the current framework of this policy field (e.g. international trade or monetary systems) are not integrated; and, lastly, most approaches defy proper monitoring and evaluation of implementation.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, the most recent postcolonial debate, like many others since the 1960s, has so far had little impact on the policies implemented. Had the inconvenient truths such debates have broached and the consequences of them been properly learned from, the whole policy field and Western approaches to development would have been abandoned decades ago. The question, therefore, arises of whether any further investment into the existing structures is justified at all, even though this risks further delegitimisation of the policy field among both the Western electorate and the ‘less or least developed countries’ that constitute the receiving states. To answer this question, one has to return to some general concepts of politics, which will be explored in the following section from a centre–right perspective.

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<sup>20</sup> World Health Organization, ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ (2024).

<sup>21</sup> UN, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023* (10 July 2023).

<sup>22</sup> Climate change policy, which is now competing as a new conceptual framework for development co-operation, shares a lot of similarities in terms of being overambitious and failing to achieve set goals.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. S. Friedrich and M. Kamp, ‘Interest-Based Policy Rather Than a Save-the-World Approach’, *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* (September 2023).



# A new approach to development (cooperation) from a centre–right perspective

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As described above, the normative foundations of development policy are nowhere near as clear and coherent as official statements suggest. The ongoing geopolitical debate on values and interests ('idealism vs. realism'), which has huge implications for the objectives and design of development policy, is a clear example of this. If, for example, you propagate a neo-realist view of interstate relations and international politics as being a 'zero-sum game', a large part of the normative foundation of the current EU development approach is simply obsolete.

## An overview of the positions of European centre–right parties on development policy

As a starting point for establishing what is widely accepted as the mainstream liberal–conservative and Christian Democratic thinking on development policy, a selection of relevant conceptual documents (election manifestos, basic programmes etc.) published by the European People's Party (EPP) member parties between 2000 and 2023 has been analysed. The analysis looks at the basic lines of argumentation, the complexity of the proposals and the degree to which they have been implemented in cases where the party is participating in government.<sup>24</sup> The four main lessons from this analysis are as follows:

- As a general observation, more elaborate concepts of development policy can be found in the texts of the member parties of Western and Northern European countries. These parties have decades-long records of global engagement in development policy and their policies are embedded in a broader public discourse and networks of (international) non-governmental organisations. In most of the member states in Central and Eastern Europe, there has, as yet, been little substantial debate on this policy field.
- As described below, the linking of policies to the basic political values of conservatism and Christian Democracy remains rather weak and often superficial. In most cases, a moral obligation is cited without any in-depth reflection on the underlying norms or unwanted consequences of this obli-

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<sup>24</sup> For details, see Appendix 2.





gation. The positions of many EPP member parties simply follow the global mainstream arguments, shaped by leftist political movements. We found hardly any substantial criticism of the dominant development policy concepts from a coherent ideological perspective or the development of any clear, truly conservative alternatives.

- A majority of positions on development policy are still almost exclusively linked to national policies. Promises are made to better coordinate national and European levels of development policy, but national traditions and interests still prevail. The same is true for global initiatives, such as the MDGs and SDGs, despite references being made to global responsibilities.
- In recent years, the fight against climate change has set a new paradigm for development and is about to streamline future development approaches.

Overall, this short analysis shows a diverse and often not deeply reflected-upon set of arguments for engaging in DC.<sup>25</sup> Most of them are in line with the mainstream global development policy narrative, as expressed, for example, in the MDGs and SDGs. They lack a genuinely different approach that takes into account the centre–right perspective.<sup>26</sup>

The deplorable fact that development policy is still primarily affiliated with non-conservative political forces is the direct consequence of the lack of a theoretical foundation. This is similar to what can be observed in the centre–right parties' climate change and green transition policies, where the political left and green movements have largely framed the discourse space and semantics. Therefore, one must find criteria for the justification and implementation of development aid derived from the basic political concepts of the European centre–right. These concepts can then be taken as genuine points of reference for criticising current development policy and developing alternative approaches.

## Other sources

The most systematic reflection on development from a centre–right perspective can be found within Christian social ethics and, particularly, Catholic social teaching. This comes as no surprise, as issues of human dignity, social justice and the

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<sup>25</sup> See Appendix 2.

<sup>26</sup> There are several countries where the political forces of the centre–right and the Christian Democratic movement have engaged in development policy for decades, e.g. Germany, and a more sophisticated discussion has developed. But as the overview of the EPP member parties shows, development policy is, in most cases, a *quantité négligeable* in party programmes and election campaigns (see Appendix 2).



global ‘common good’ have been key elements since the early days of this—genuinely transnational—movement.<sup>27</sup> Outside of this ideological bubble, however, development policy has never been systematically debated in conservative or liberal circles. If at all, political debates have remained very much on the level of criticising operations—they rarely delve into the rationale behind the policy. A good example from outside the EU is a debate within the British Conservative Party about reforming the UK development aid system, which was focused on its efficiency criteria and to what extent development policy should be instrumental in achieving other objectives such as security.<sup>28</sup> Another case is the debate among conservatives in the US on how to maintain a liberal world order, of which the US sees itself as guardian. Here, development aid has always been a factor in the systemic rivalry with what was the socialist Soviet Union, and is now Russia. In recent years, this debate has been revived, due to China promoting its own alternative development model.<sup>29</sup>

## Building blocks for a new development policy

What could be the conceptual basis for a genuine centre–right approach to development policy? The author considers three building blocks as crucial and linked by the same philosophical approach. These elements are all rooted in the cornerstones of twentieth-century centre–right thought, regardless of the differences between Christian Democratic, conservative and liberal thinking.<sup>30</sup> The following sections will describe each criterion and apply it to selected challenges presented by the current European development aid system.

### *Criterion 1: limitation*

Deep mistrust and rejection of (allegedly) comprehensive, catch-all solutions characterise conservative and liberal thinking. Conservatives have always been

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<sup>27</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio: Encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the Development of Peoples* (Rome, 1967); Pope Francis, “‘Oeconomicae et pecuniariae quaestiones’: Considerations for an Ethical Discernment Regarding Some Aspects of the Present Economic-Financial System” of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development’, Press Office (Rome, 17 May 2018).

<sup>28</sup> E. Mawdsley et al., ‘Reflections on the Conservative Agenda for International Development’, *Area* 43/4 (2011).

<sup>29</sup> J. Yuan, F. Su and X. Ouyang, *China’s Evolving Approach to Foreign Aid*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Policy Paper (2022).

<sup>30</sup> For an overview, see: J.-W. Müller, *Das demokratische Zeitalter: Eine politische Ideengeschichte Europas im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018); E. Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018, 2nd edn.); C. Invernizzi Accetti, *What is Christian Democracy? Politics, Religion and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).



well aware of the fallibility of political ideologies, the unpredictability of complex systems and the limits of the ability to govern social processes.<sup>31</sup> As the quotes above in the section titled ‘Some Reflections on the Concept of Development’ show, development policy has never lacked far-reaching ambitions. This became even more obvious when the shortcomings of ‘technical cooperation’, the predominant approach to development policy of Western countries until the 1980s, became clear.<sup>32</sup> Next to ‘poverty eradication’, which remained the objective, ‘good governance’ was seen as any development policy’s overarching paradigm and foundation, acknowledging that strong political institutions matter to achieving (self-)sustaining development. This conceptual shift was and is valid for historical and theoretical reasons.<sup>33</sup> Yet, it opened the gates to overstretched objectives (‘saving the world’), instruments and budgets, and in many cases made evaluation even more difficult. Due to offence being taken to the principle of ‘limitation’, there have been severe backlashes against this policy approach in recent years. This has contributed to the West losing ground because the idea of inducing change and managing the complex transformation of societies has been built on questionable assumptions. One should not be misled by inflationary terms such as ‘ownership’, ‘partnership’ or ‘level playing field’. The asymmetrical, hierarchical relations between donor and recipient remain, in most cases, unchanged. If anything, the asymmetry of information mostly plays into the hands of the receiving side.<sup>34</sup>

On the conceptual level, the interpretation of core ideas, such as ‘democratisation’, is often heavily disputed among the political parties. When we include the shaping and management of political processes on the donor’s side, problems multiply. These start with the need for coordination between the various EU institutions within the Commission (e.g. between the European Union External Action Service and the other Directorate-Generals) and its agencies, and continue with the interactions with the recipients. In practice, most of these attempts result in a tremendous waste of resources and create entry points for third actors to exploit and extort external funds.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> R. Sruton, *How to Be a Conservative* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014); A. Rödder, *Konservativ 21.0: Eine Agenda für Deutschland* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2019).

<sup>32</sup> I. Goldin, *Development: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2018).

<sup>33</sup> Still seminal on the topic of ‘institutions mattering’, see D. Acemoglu and J. A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* (London: Profile Books, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> A striking example is the instrument of ‘budget aid’, which is based on the assumption of responsibility and ownership. This concept, however, is caught up in the chicken-and-egg problem, as it requires certain institutional preconditions that it aims to create. See J. Vaessen, ‘Dealing With Attribution in an Increasingly Interconnected and Policy-Saturated World’, *World Bank Group*, 25 January 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Or even worse, creating and contributing to the rise of anti-Western movements and alliances; see T. Mayer, ‘Der Westen fördert den Anti-Westen’, *Cicero*, 2024.



The above-mentioned ‘auxiliary’ function submits development policy to the rationales of other policy fields. Here, another problem of coherence appears as the degree of ‘Unionisation’ of policy fields differs. The (diverse) interests of the member states often prevail, even in fields such as trade, where the EU has acquired almost exclusive competences. A similar lack of coherence can be observed in relation to international organisations, such as the UN.

Decades of practical experience have shown that achieving these complex goals in amongst the myriad interactions (intended and unintended) of real societies is beyond the ability of any governance capacity, whether local or societal, and in particular is beyond the ability of external donors to effect. Nurturing corruption and stabilising non-democratic regimes, thus preventing long-lasting societal change and distorting local economies, have been the well-known results. Furthermore, proper monitoring and evaluation of these processes are almost impossible as the problems of ‘attribution’ and impact assessment<sup>36</sup> have never been sufficiently solved, either in theory or in the field.

### *Criterion 2: subsidiarity*

The principle of subsidiarity, a core concept of Christian Democracy and a key principle of the European Constitution,<sup>37</sup> is a concrete expression of the idea of limitation. The current development policy and its political ‘sister’, climate change policy, violate this criterion in many cases. International development organisations often label their work as ‘helping people to help themselves’—including the promise to make their help obsolescent in the medium to long term—which seems perfectly in line with the principle of subsidiarity. However, in reality, such promises have rarely materialised due to the actions of vested interests and the presence of built-in dependency structures, which de facto perpetuate the need for help.

With subsidiarity meant to address and enable the most suitable level or institution,<sup>38</sup> development policy has always struggled to identify the right entry point for intervention in terms of the central versus the local level, state versus private organisations or administrative versus market-driven mechanisms. The

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<sup>36</sup> In complex systems, such as human societies or the climate, linear causality is almost impossible to prove. Sophisticated methods such as multivariate factor analysis have strong limitations in the social sciences. For the attribution problem in the case of climate science, see Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Chapter 9: Climate Change 2007: Working Group I: The Physical Science Basis, Contribution of Working Group I to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge (2007); Vaessen, ‘Dealing With Attribution’.

<sup>37</sup> Article 5(3) of the Treaty on European Union and Protocol no. 2 on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

<sup>38</sup> Council of Europe, *Definition and Limits of the Principle of Subsidiarity* (2019).



good performance of administrative layers and the relative strength of non-state actors are preconditions for the success of the subsidiarity-oriented approach. These conditions are unfortunately not a given in most developing countries, where similar constitutional conditions, for example, the relative strength of local communities or political freedom, do not exist.

Subsidiarity should also govern the donor side's actions. However, the *mélange* of EU and national development policy is not structured by clear principles of subsidiarity. We often find similarly designed programmes on both levels. It is hard to find specific competences or objectives on the EU level that have not already been addressed by national policies. As its specific purpose and justification, the EU aims to provide—in line with the principle of subsidiarity—a framework for a coordinated approach by the EU institutions and development policies on the national level to enhance complementarity and impact.<sup>39</sup>

However the points of reference for development policy, that is, the MDGs and SDGs, had already been incorporated into national strategies. Given the weight of large national donors such as Germany, one could even ask who is coordinating whom. The role of better coordination and coherence is also claimed by the OECD DAC and several (sub)organisations of the UN. Thus, today the complementary nature of EU development policy remains unclear: it is often fishing in the same pond as others. The real driver for the establishment of a genuine EDP can instead be found in an institutional interest to provide the EU with its own toolkit for foreign relations. For the moment, the EU does not really provide specific added value in the framework of development policy in a way that satisfies the principle of subsidiarity.

### *Criterion 3: conditionality*

Conditionality<sup>40</sup>—the mutual agreement in development partnerships to adhere to basic values, such as human rights, transparency or gender equality—is one of development policy's most fiercely debated elements. This is not surprising as it is linked to the EU's self-conception as a values-based, 'normative power'.<sup>41</sup> Its inclusion in agreements is also reflective of bad experiences in the past, when 'good governance', as a major success factor, was often sidelined.

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<sup>39</sup> European Commission, *The New European Consensus on Development: 'Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future'* (2017), 4.

<sup>40</sup> On the discussion of conditionality, see OECD, *Policy Ownership and Aid Conditionality in the Light of the Financial Crisis* (Paris: OECD Development Centre Studies, 2009); A. Schmitz, *Conditionality in Development Aid Policy*, SWP Research Paper (2006).

<sup>41</sup> *European Union External Action Service*, 'Critically Assess and Analyse the Notion that the EU is a Normative Power'.



But as often as this principle has been highlighted by Western donors in the past decades, it has been abandoned for different reasons. Some critics denounce it as ‘normative imperialism/colonialism’. But more often it is the competition from new, mostly non-democratic competitors that has fed the concern among Western donors of being driven out if they adhere (too closely) to demanding normative standards of good governance.<sup>42</sup>

There remain strong and valid arguments in favour of conditionality. The first is that not remaining true to our values would open up accusations of double standards—often from the same voices that accuse the West of imposing universalist concepts. Second, applying this criterion does not per se reject or disrespect diverse socio-cultural development patterns, but is largely in line with the first and second criteria (limitation and subsidiarity). Third, past experience has proven that efficiency and sustainable development are intricately linked to basic standards of transparency and accountability (i.e. good governance). Finally, conditionality provides a strong guardrail for donors against costly, endless and detrimental engagements, such as the recent ones in Afghanistan and the Sahel.<sup>43</sup>

## Consequences and recommendations

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In the field of development policy, centre–right parties in Europe should no longer simply follow the trail set by international development organisations and the development complex, which have specific self-interests. Shifting budget priorities and the rise of new donors, among other factors, have already led to a substantial crisis of legitimacy in development policy. Centre–right parties are called upon to come up with their own approach, developed from their fundamental political beliefs.

- The almost constant increase in budgets cannot hide the fact that traditional approaches to EU development aid are facing a profound crisis of legitimacy. With the rise of (right-wing) populist forces, sceptical of any international

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<sup>42</sup> Empirical evidence on whether this ousting of Western donors is really the result of sticking to basic principles is weak.

<sup>43</sup> The mistake made in these cases was a fatal combination of sticking to values in theory and gradually abandoning them in practice. This led to a rapid, self-fulfilling delegitimation of Western engagement, both in the receiving countries and among the public in the donor countries.



cooperation, and foreseeable budget restrictions in the future, the current business model of ‘the more, the better’ has to come to an end.

- As unrealistic as it may sound in the face of vested interests, the established national and international development cooperation system must be largely dismantled. It has failed to achieve its overambitious goals and no longer serves European interests on the global level—and, even worse, is contrary to its intended outcomes and the stronger role of Europe in international relations.
- The Western concept of ‘development’ has never been able to eliminate its (post)colonial connotations and has failed to serve as a basis for equal cooperation with receiving countries. ‘Putting old wine in new bottles’ is in vain and the traditional narratives have failed to convince emerging nations.
- A broad understanding of ‘sustainability’ has to become the conceptual framework for aid as a cross-cutting approach. It gives a much clearer indication of the direction and the results that need to be achieved than the vague idea of ‘development’.
- The ethical implications and contradictions of the current systems should be openly discussed and unrealistic solutions, mostly from the left of the political spectrum, clearly denounced.
- Whichever new framework is found to support this transformation most efficiently, political conditionality should not become obsolete, even in times of ‘realistic turns’ in foreign policy. Giving up on conditionality would lead to a further loss of credibility for Europe in terms of the values it stands for. The danger of being ‘out of business’ is less severe than diplomacy and vested interests often suggest. Real mutual interest requires the acceptance of conditions on both sides, including transparent limits of engagement.
- Coordination between the EU and the member states still needs improvement. From a conceptual perspective, the specific legitimacy and added value of the EU level are unclear and weak. While there are no clear answers, it will be hard to convince the electorate about specific European engagement, particularly if this discussion is linked to an increase in budget or even to the creation of an EU own financial resource for the field.

There is no reason to abhor the principle of ‘unity in diversity’. Under the guiding principle of subsidiarity, a clear division of labour among the member states could become as effective as forced unification or the doubling of efforts.





# Appendix 1: Europe in the context of global development cooperation

**Figure 1 Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation  
Instrument allocations for the period 2021–7 (in Euro)**

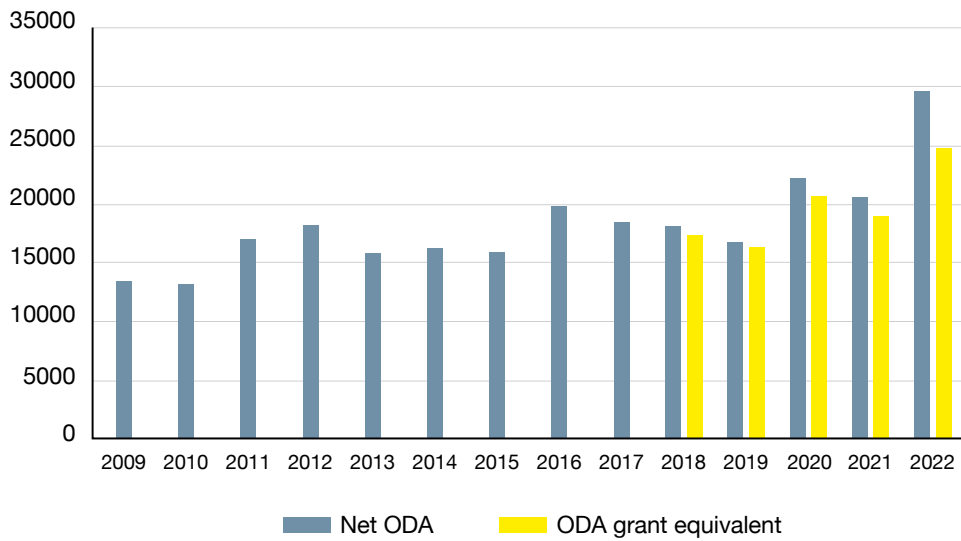
<b>Kind of Programmes</b>	
Geographic Programmes	60.388.000.000
<i>Neighbour</i>	19.323.000.000*
<i>Sub-Saharan Africa</i>	29.181.000.000*
<i>Asia and the Pacific</i>	8.489.000.000
<i>Americas and the Caribbean</i>	3.395.000.000
Thematic Programmes	6.358.000.000
<i>Human rights and democracy</i>	1.362.000.000
<i>Civil society organisations</i>	1.362.000.000
<i>Peace, stability and conflict</i>	908.000.000
<i>Global challenges</i>	2.726.000.000
Rapid response action	3.128.000.000

Source: A. Pouwels, *The Integration of the European Development Funds into the MFF 2021–2027*, European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, PE 694.414 (June 2021), Table 2. \*minimum budget.



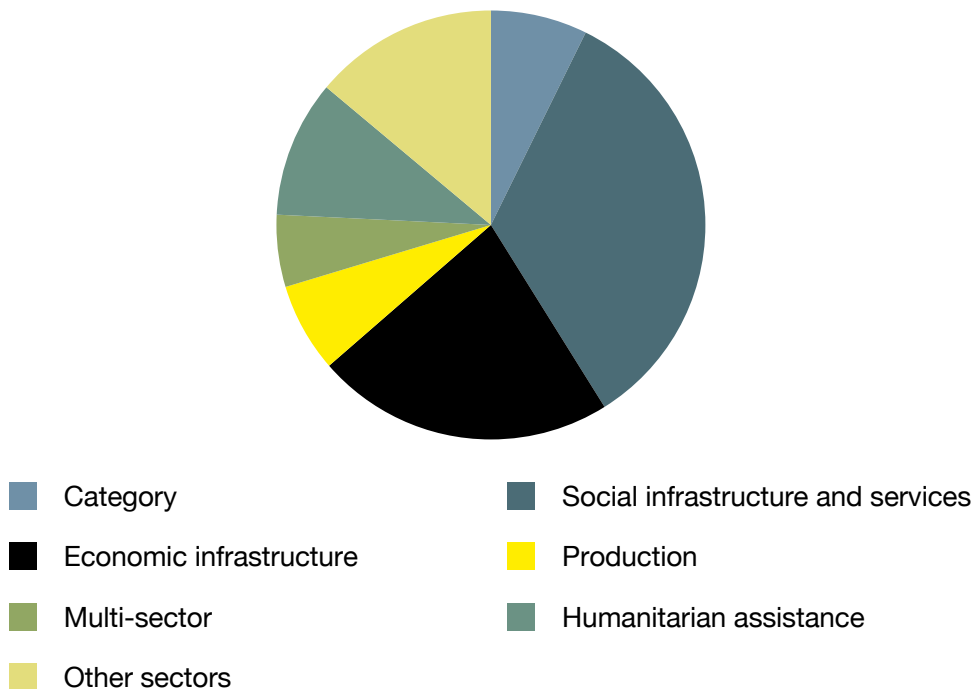


**Figure 2 EU institutions: official development assistance (ODA) volumes, 2009–22 (in Mio USD)**



Source: OECD, 'European Union Institutions', in OECD, *Development Co-operation Profiles* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023).

**Figure 3 EU institutions: bilateral ODA by sector, 2021 (in Mio USD)**



Source: OECD, 'European Union Institutions', in OECD, *Development Co-operation Profiles* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023).



# Appendix 2

Figure 4 Overview of the EPP member parties' positions on development policy

Member party, country <sup>a</sup>	Ideological rationale (why)	Position on national development policy (what, how, with whom)	Position on European development policy	Sources
EPP, EU	<p>Moral responsibility plays a very important role, with Christian Democratic values being closely linked to a desire to promote more prosperous, fair and modern societies in Europe and around the world.</p> <p>The growing self-awareness of the EU as a geostrategic power means that it must accept greater responsibility at the global level for addressing perceived wrongs and inequalities through effective development policy.</p>	<p>Little is mentioned regarding individual member states' policies, but there is a clear conviction that all EPP member parties and EU member states should work closely together to create solutions at the EU level.</p>	<p>The EPP, with reference to the EU institutions, must develop a comprehensive and far-reaching development policy for the EU itself, while also playing an active role in development issues at the global level.</p>	<p>EPP, <i>EPP Manifesto: 'Let's Open the Next Chapter for Europe Together'</i>, Brussels (2019); EPP, <i>A Sustainable Europe</i>, Policy Paper 3, adopted at the EPP Congress, Helsinki, 7–8 November 2018; EPP, 'EPP Vision for a Sustainable Planet: Cutting the Emissions While Creating Jobs', Resolution adopted at the EPP Congress, Zagreb, 20–21 November 2019.</p>

<sup>a</sup>These are the current party names and do not reflect any former names or mergers with other conservative parties.

<p>Christian Democratic Union of Germany (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands, CDU), Germany</p>	<p>Moral responsibility is highly regarded, along with the often-mentioned need to protect Germany and ordinary German citizens from the global dangers they are confronted by.</p>	<p>Development policy is effectively understood in terms of other policy issues such as digitalisation and agriculture, with an emphasis on confronting global issues at the local level—ordinary citizens should see and feel impacted by the solutions, not just the problems.</p> <p>There is little material provided at the federal level, however, or on how the CDU could play a role in solving challenges at the global level.</p>	<p>Little direct material is provided on this; it would appear that the CDU would officially and openly support any EPP-led initiative.</p>	<p>CDU, 'Entwicklungs- und Menschenrechtspolitik'; CDU, 'Vorschläge der CDU zu Energie und Klimaschutz' (9 August 2023); CDU, 'Der globalen Krise zielgerichtet begegnen' (8 April 2022); Germany, Federal Government, <i>Antrag der Fraktion der CDU/CSU: Der Ukraine jetzt und in Zukunft helfen, Nahrungsmittelversorgung in der Welt sicherstellen sowie europäische und deutsche Landwirtschaft krisenfest gestalten</i>, 20/1336 (5 April 2022).</p>
<p>Austrian People's Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP), Austria</p>	<p>Similar to the CDU, but with a greater emphasis on looking both inwards to how development issues affect Austria as well as outwards to how Austria can respond to global challenges in a European and global context.</p>	<p>Similar to the above, with less material specifically dedicated to development in itself, with agriculture, infrastructure and so on effectively assuming this focus. The party concentrates mostly on development <i>per se</i> within Austria and Europe.</p>	<p>It is recognised that the party must be proactive in supporting sustainability initiatives and there is commitment to supporting wider EPP positions relevant to Austria.</p>	<p>ÖVP, <i>Grundsatzprogramm 2015 der Österreichischen Volkspartei</i> (12 May 2015); ÖVP, <i>Aus Verantwortung für Österreich. Regierungsprogramm 2020–2024</i> (Vienna, 2020).</p>





<p>Christian Democratic Appeal (Christen-Democratisch Appèl, CDA), the Netherlands</p>	<p>Development policy is perceived as a policy of progress. The CDA believes that the Netherlands must embrace development policy for modernisation and for a fairer society.</p>	<p>Overall the view from the CDA appears to be that the Netherlands is essentially on the right path but must always strive to do more; however, all development-related initiatives on their website available in English focus overwhelmingly on the Netherlands.</p>	<p>As the CDA links development with progress and modernisation, it is very likely to support an EPP-led EU development policy presented in such terms.</p>	<p>CDA, 'Ambitieuus en realistisch klimaatbeleid'; CDA, 'Toekomstgerichte landbouw'.</p>
<p>Moderate Party (Moderaterna), Sweden</p>	<p>As with the parties considered above, there is little overt reference to development policy, with the party presenting itself as a party of law and order and one which focuses on a 'return to values'. Its approach to development policy should be understood in these terms, as searching for a form of security through sustainability.</p>	<p>There is mention of a plan for the 2030s and of the need to fight climate change through major investment in nuclear power in Sweden—the search for security is apparent here, as energy is linked to defence concerns.</p>	<p>There is limited mention of attitudes in this regard from the party. However, from their rhetoric it appears that using the concept of securing the future through development policy in Sweden, Europe and globally could be effective in securing support for EPP-led proposals.</p>	<p>Moderaterna, 'Handlingsprogram för 2030-talet'; Moderaterna, 'En färdplan för ny kärnkraft i Sverige' (16 November 2023); Moderaterna, 'Ny överenskommelse om klimatpolitik i Tidöavtalet' (14 November 2023).</p>



<p>Fine Gael (Family of the Irish), Ireland</p>	<p>Support for development policy is closely linked to a strong sense of moral obligation to help others and ensure mutual prosperity, as well as a conviction of the importance of Ireland's longstanding role in international organisations.</p>	<p>Development policy within Ireland is understood as a crucial element of creating a more modern, just and equitable society for all. Development is discussed as a defined issue in its own right and other issues such as agriculture and infrastructure are considered in close connection with it.</p>	<p>There is a strong sense that Ireland must commit to supporting EU initiatives on a general level, and Fine Gael gives the impression that it would strongly support EPP-led initiatives and proposals in addition to those agreed by the institutions.</p>	<p>Fine Gael, Programme for Government: Our Shared Future (2021).</p>
		<p>In contrast to some other parties mentioned in this table, there seems to be more overt awareness of the interplay between development policy at home and development policy abroad, especially in the EU and the UN. Fine Gael also demonstrates an awareness that cooperation with other governing parties on this and other policy areas is essential in order for progress to be made.</p>		



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# Author's biography

**Dr Peter Hefe** graduated in economics and economic history from the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt in 1997. He initially worked as an economic researcher at the Institute for Economy and Society, Bonn, joining the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) in 2003 as head of the Economic Policy and Political Education Department. In 2006 he became head of the China, Southeast Asia and India Department in the Asia and Pacific Team of the KAS in Berlin.

From December 2010 to February 2015, he worked as head of the China Office of the KAS in Shanghai. From March 2015 to April 2019, he led the regional project, Energy Security and Climate Change, based in Hong Kong and China. Between May 2019 and December 2020, he was the Director of the Asia and Pacific Team in Berlin.

Since January 2022, he has been Policy Director of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, the think tank of the European People's Party in Brussels. His work focuses on foreign and security policy, economic policy, international development cooperation and energy/climate policy. He is also an expert on Asia's political, economic and social developments.



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Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies  
Rue du Commerce 20  
Brussels, BE 1000

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