Fit for creating partnerships of equals with the global south? Tensions in the EU's development policy post-2020

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The European Union seeks to adjust its external policies to the shifting challenges of the international order. As part of this adjustment, the European Commission headed by Ursula von der Leyen embarked on a mission to revitalise and reconfigure its partnership with the African continent and the ACP group of states. According to the EU, the era of donor-recipient relations is over. The core of this effort is a novel and more flexible financial instrument for external relations. In this article, we shed a critical light on the implicit tensions in the EU’s approach for creating a more effective and equal international development policy post-2020. We develop a theoretically anchored and empirically relevant conceptualisation of partnership and show that the EU’s reform of its budget for external action entails a shift towards more domination instead of a partnership of equals with the global south.

Keywords: partnership; EU development policy; global south; justice; Global Europe instrument

Introduction

Since the entry of the Von der Leyen Commission in December 2019, the European Union has focussed on a renewed partnership of equals with Africa (Von der Leyen, 2019b, 2020). In her mission letter, Commission president Von der Leyen instructed the incoming Commissioner for international partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, to develop a new comprehensive strategy for Africa which “should create a partnership of equals and mutual interest” (Von der Leyen, 2019a). The ambition to form partnerships is not new but has reiteratively appeared since the 1964 cooperation agreement between the European Economic Community (EEC) and 18 African ex-colonies signed in Yaoundé.[1] Despite its ambition of creating partnerships, the EU has been criticised for being patronizing instead of a partner. For example, conditioning foreign aid to the respect of human rights principles has been perceived as “lecturing” rather than constructive support (Decalo, 1992; Del Biondo, 2016; Hurt, 2003; Rutazibwa, 2013). Scholars have also pointed to how the EU has been perceived as “talking at” its partners rather than “talking with” them (Chaban, Knodt, & Verdun, 2017; Elgström, 2010; Fioramonti, 2009; Fioramonti & Lucarelli, 2011).

Notwithstanding this critique, the EU's revitalised ambition of establishing a partnership of equals with the global south is worth taking seriously. Several institutional changes were made to strengthen the EU's relationship with its partners. The commissioner for international cooperation and development was replaced by a commissioner for international partnerships. Incumbent Jutta Urpilainen emphasised that the EU would move away from donor-recipient relationships and build partnerships based on mutual interests and values (European Parliament, 2019). Simultaneously, the EU conducted an overhaul of its external financing. In June 2021, based on a Commission proposal of 2018, the EU agreed on a Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), also called the Global Europe instrument,[2] which merges previously separate instruments for financing external relations into one single instrument for external action and integrates the extrabudgetary European Development Fund (EDF) (Council of the European Union & European Parliament, 2021). Furthermore, the EU negotiated a new agreement with its partners in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific, which breaks the decade-old coupling of development finance (the EDF) and cooperation agreement (the Cotonou agreement) (Carbone, 2021). At first sight, alterations to the EU's budget may seem like a matter that only affects EU institutions and member states. Yet, the end of designating resources specifically to the partnership with the ACP by decoupling the partnership agreement from its means of implementation and abolishing the intergovernmental European Development Fund represents a critical change.

Given the revitalisation of the EU's ambition to be a genuine partner coupled to institutional adjustments in the EU's international development cooperation, we ask: Is the EU up to the task of a more genuine partnership policy? While the EU's ambition of creating partnership of equals is often dismissed as empty rhetoric, we add to previous studies by taking a conceptual starting point. Therefore, first, we propose a theoretically grounded and empirically relevant conceptualisation of partnership to critically evaluate the EU's approach towards partnership in international cooperation and development. We define partnership as the absence of domination of one partner over the other as well as to include mechanisms for participation that secure due hearing of affected parties. While much of the existing literature dismiss the possibility of real and equal partnerships due to power asymmetries (Hurt, 2003; Langan, 2018), we suggest that differences in capacities, power or financial clout, do not necessarily create dominating relationships. An equal partnership can be based on mutual respect and common goals, despite differences between the partners. We outline the parameters of such a concept for the EU's policy to move towards a partnership of equals with the global south. Based on this starting point, we unpack the EU's ambition to create a partnership of equals and zoom into the institutional changes proposed for the EU's financing of external relations. In detail, we analyse the shift from a strong coupling between financial and cooperation agreements (EDF and Cotonou) to the decoupling of the post 2020 instrument for external action (NDICI) from the EU's partnerships. We observe that there is a tension between the EU's wish to introduce more flexibility of funding and the partners' concern for predictability of funds, and between a more EU-inclusive decision-making system that may come at the cost of a more partner-inclusive process. These tensions make a meaningful transition to international partnerships more difficult.

Conceptualising partnership

Despite the emphasis on partnership in Von der Leyen's Commission, the EU's ambition to establish a partnership of equals with the global south is not new (Del Biondo, 2020; Kotsopoulos & Mattheis, 2018). The early agreements with the newly independent states in sub-Saharan Africa were partnership agreements, epitomised in the Yaoundé (1963) and Lomé Convention (1975) between the EEC and a group of countries in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP), since 2020 organised in the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS).[3] Yet, over the years, the partnership rhetoric suffered as critics argued that the way the EU operates in its development policy reflects a fundamental lack of justice and mutual respect towards its partners (Crawford, 1996; Langan, 2018; Raffer, 2002; Ravenhill, 1985).

In the early 2000s, several "instances of partnership" emerged, which involved agreements and policies with countries and regions in sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific, but also in North Africa, the Middle East and the EU's eastern neighbourhood. Yet, the EU's understanding of partnership needed to accommodate demands for (political) conditionality *and* flexibility or, what Raffer (2002) calls a "restored" and "Orwellian" understanding of partnership. The conditions of political elements and flexibility were largely imposed from the EU's side and created an image of coercion (Hurt, 2003). This image was enhanced when the EU pushed for Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA) with various ACP regions, which observers strongly criticised on grounds of missing genuine partnership and rather representing a "diktat" or "rationalisation" (from an EU perspective) of partnership (Flint, 2009).

But what does a “real and equal” partnership entail? The EU has come some way in adjusting its development policy in accordance with the views and opinions of its partners. In line with the global emphasis on *ownership*, as part of the global aid effectiveness agenda developing in the early 2000s, EU development policy has attempted to enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of aid through initiatives such as donor coordination around partner country strategies for development (Steingass, 2021). In EU-internal negotiations, proponents of securing recipient ownership and participation over donor-driven coordination have managed to get support for their view, which is reflected in the EU’s development policy documents (Saltnes, 2019). Some studies find that the EU has also in practice respected partners’ ownership (Del Biondo, 2020). Yet others, such as Keijzer and Black (2020), find that the principle has been marginalised in more recent years. Thus, the literature on EU development policy often dismisses the EU’s partnership policy as failed. For instance, it has been argued that structural inequalities between the EU and countries in the global south fundamentally inhibits the possibility of an equal partnership (Langan, 2018). Yet, with some noticeable exceptions, few attempts have been made to define and theoretically specify what such partnerships would entail. Belonging to the exceptions we find those who define *equality* as the key dimension for partnership (Abrahamsen, 2004; Del Biondo, 2020).

While a focus on equality is a useful starting point, we seek to further tease out what conditions are necessary to establish a partnership between countries on the global level. Anchored in the literature on global political justice, we posit that the absence of domination is a minimum condition for establishing partnerships. We follow Buckinx, Trejo-Mathys, and Waligore (2015, p. 1) in their definition of domination as “subjection to the will of another or others”. A dominated person is subjected to the power of her master, “she is constrained in her choices, unable to freely form life plans, and denied equal, autonomous standing with others in a political community or shared social structures” (Buckinx et al., 2015, p. 1). We thereby define the condition for partnership on the political dimension and not on the question of the partners’ ability to fairly distribute resources (redistributive justice). But how can domination be avoided?

We focus on two dimensions: First, we assume that partnerships involve a non-dominating form of political association, whereby one partner is not imposing their will on the other partner(s) (Pettit, 2010). This is in line with the above mentioned focus on equality stressed by Abrahamsen (2004) and Del Biondo (2020). While power asymmetries will always exist between partners and may vary according to different dimensions of a partnership, we would expect that one partner would not make use of its power surplus to impose its will or preferences on the other. Second, we assume that partnerships allow for collaborative arrangements and decision-making procedures whereby affected parties would be given a due hearing. Individuals and groups must be co-determining agents in the partnerships they are subject to (Forst, 2018, p. 207). This assumption is in line with a participatory approach to decision-making (Young, 2000). This might be particularly important for creating partnerships with countries in the global south. Ake, for instance, highlights the difference between the West's focus on individualism and the communal character of African societies: "The African concept of participation is as much a matter of taking part as of sharing the rewards and burdens of community membership [...] It is the involvement in the process rather than the acceptability of the end decision, which satisfies the need to participate" (Ake, 1993, p. 243). Hence, the most important element is the right to participate and that your opinion and interests are given due hearing, rather that gaining your preferred result. While conceptions of partnership may entail more than the absence of the use of arbitrary power and a participatory approach, we assume that these two elements serve as minimum conditions for establishing partnerships between international actors.

Against this definition of partnership, we seek to analyse the extent to which the EU's reforms meet its renewed partnership rhetoric. A central test case is funding because it constitutes the means for implementing the EU's cooperation policies. In the context of the EU's changing policy, especially the shift from the Cotonou to the post-Cotonou partnership agreement, we analyse the EU's new external financial instrument and compare it to the situation before the reform. The analysis is conducted on the basis of the Commission's proposal for a new external instrument (European Commission, 2018b, 2020a) and complemented with EU and ACP official documents that illuminate EU and ACP positions on the Global Europe instrument.

In line with non-domination, we would expect one side (the "donor") to avoid using its power surplus over the "partner" to impose its will or preferences. Furthermore, in line with participation, we would expect collaborative arrangements that secure that the voices of affected citizens are heard. Agreements and dialogue between partners are not only a matter for representatives of the partners authorities but includes collaborative arrangements and deliberative processes with open contestation among all affected parties. This could take place, for instance, through the involvement of parliaments, joint institutions and inclusive standing bodies for civil society participation. In sum, the terms of the cooperation and assistance provided would have to be negotiated and agreed by the parties in a collaborative and deliberative setting without signs of power bargains.

A reform fit for creating partnerships?

By 2020, the EU's partnership agreement with the ACP group of states was due for renewal. The new post-Cotonou agreement was initialled by the partners in Brussels 16 April 2021. The European Development Fund (EDF), which had constituted the EU's means of implementation for the Cotonou partnership agreement, was set to expire in 2020. For the post-Cotonou agreement, the EU did not reserve dedicated means of implementation, implying the end of the close coupling of the partnership agreement and dedicated EU funding. Instead, during the negotiations of the EU's long-term budget, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), for the period from 2021 to 2027, the European Parliament and EU member states in the Council agreed on a new instrument for external action. This 79.5 billion euro instrument, the Neighbourhood, Development and Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)-Global Europe instrument (Council of the European Union & European Parliament, 2021), comprises the largest share of external action funds and implied the end of the extrabudgetary EDF. This outcome goes back to proposals of the European Commission in June 2018 (European Commission, 2018b) and May 2020 (European Commission, 2020a). The latter updated the former to include funds to be used to support the EU's partners to recover from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

EDF and ACP-EU agreements: Couple for partnership?

The first EDF was launched in 1959 as the funding instrument for the Rome Treaty's policy of association. With the Lomé Convention 1975, the EDF became the principal funding instrument for the cooperation with the ACP group. The paring between partnership agreement and designated financing instrument implied that, while decisions regarding the funding instrument remained with the contributors, the EU member states, there was some degree of participation as partners were involved in the governance of their relationship. Looking at the extent and the quality of that participation, the Cotonou agreement involved not only government-to-government engagement but also engagement and some degree of deliberation on a parliamentary level (Delputte & Williams, 2016). What is special about the EDF is its link to the partnership agreement as well as the long duration of EDF funds, which allowed for predictability. The EDF represented a major innovation as it was distinct from existing bilateral and multilateral aid institutions through its institutional entrenchment in the Commission and the resulting separation from member states. Yet, over time, scholars have observed a continuous decline of the partnership aspect, especially linked to the increasing conditions attached to EDF monies over revisions of Lomé and later Cotonou (Arts & Dickson, 2004; Bergmann, Delputte, Keijzer, & Verschaeve, 2019; Hadfield, 2007; Holden, 2009; Kingah, 2006). This included the one-sided enactment of various conditions along the lines of international donor standards and EU political objectives, such as good governance (Hurt, 2003). For example, the EU has sought to increase flexibility in its funding through so-called governance incentive tranches, which are performance based and were intended to move funds flexibly to countries that perform better against certain conditions, including democratic governance (Del Biondo & Orbie, 2014). These changes reduced the partnership character and turned the EDF, over time, into a more standardised aid budget dominated by EU executives.

Consequentially, there had been proposals for abolishing the EDF and "budgetise" its funds as part of the general EU budget, also with a view to improving the cooperation. A Commission proposal in 2003, however, was opposed by representatives of the ACP, especially based on concerns about "the impact that budgetisation might have on the Cotonou principles of partnership, ownership and joint management" (Mackie, Frederiksen, & Rossini, 2004, p. 17; See also ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly 2004). Moreover, concerns included the predictability of funds with (more) European Parliament involvement in funding decisions relevant for ACP-EU cooperation. The EU's annual budget cycle and the "unpredictable character of the European Parliament's future role in determining priorities" may risk a "move towards fast-spending programmes, whereas process-oriented capacity-building activities would become less attractive" (Mackie et al., 2004, pp. 16-17). Hence, while critics have pointed to inherent weaknesses in the EDF, the EU's proposal to budgetise the EDF was considered by a majority of member states and the ACP to create further challenges rather than enhancing partnership. Thus, it was not surprising that the ACP negotiation mandate for post-Cotonou demanded that the EDF was kept off the EU's budget as a separate instrument (ACP, 2018, p. 25).

The NDICI - Global Europe instrument: Flexibility and efficiency

The reform of the finance instruments for 2021-2027 integrates multiple separate instruments and funds of the 2014-2020 MFF, especially the European neighbourhood instrument (ENI), the development cooperation instrument (DCI), the instrument contributing to stability and peace (IcSP), the European instrument for democracy and human rights (EIDHR) and the partnership instrument for cooperation with third countries (PI). The NDICI thus combines instruments with geographic and with thematic focuses. The geographic pillar (60.8 billion euro) includes different regional envelopes which, reflecting the EU's strategic priorities, will be adapted to the needs and priorities of the respective countries and region. The thematic pillar (6.36 billion euro) covers funding in support of human rights and democracy, civil society, and stability and peace at a global level. The NDICI also includes a rapid response pillar (3.18 billion euro), providing funding for EU interventions for conflict prevention and in situations of crisis or instability. This pillar is explicitly geared towards addressing the EU's foreign policy needs and priorities (European Commission, 2020b). Finally a flexibility reserve of 9.53 billion euro of unallocated funds can be used to any of the three components to cater unforeseen challenges or needs (European Commission, 2021).

The instrument intends to maintain the high share ("at least 92%") of development spending, i.e., spending that fulfils the criteria for Official Development Assistance (ODA) of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (European Commission, 2018b, p. 19). Thus, the NDICI also mainstreams development funding, which previously spread across several funding instruments, including the EDF. In its 2018 proposal, the Commission explicitly cites concerns for flexibility as a principal reason for the reform, stating that "In the current context of multiple crises and conflicts, the EU needs to be able to react swiftly to changing events. However, for certain instruments, responsiveness was hindered by a lack of financial flexibility" (European Commission, 2018b, p. 6). A second rationale for reform is the effective governance of external funding. The Commission cites concerns about the EU delegations' ability to manage the various instruments effectively (European Commission, 2018b, p. 6). One common instrument also helps streamlining the complementarity between various stakeholders across and within different regions. Finally, the budgetisation of the EDF would bring a role for the European Parliament and thus enhance accountability and transparency, which is expected to enhance effectiveness.

The declared rationale of the Commission's proposal for reforming the funding instrument was that the "EU will use the funding under the instrument to build international partnerships for sustainable development" (European Commission, 2020b). Then, is the new instrument for external action fit for building equal partnerships? In the following, we discuss two underlying tensions that are particularly relevant for the EU's aim of creating partnerships. We are concerned with the extent to which the EU's proposal for a new funding instrument will create non-dominant partnerships that allow for partner participation and that focus on mutual concerns rather than one-sided interests.

Tension 1: Flexibility vs. predictability

One of the main advantages of the new instrument, according to the EU, is the enhanced flexibility of funding, especially to move money between areas to respond to changing priorities. The Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us of the importance of being able to react to short-term priorities. Hence, at first sight, increased flexibility of funding might be something that both sides of the partnership may consider necessary and an asset. However, if too much flexibility is inserted, the partnership risks losing predictability in funding and weakening country ownership (Jones, Di Ciommo, Sayós Monràs, Sherriff, & Bossuyt, 2018, p. 12). Predictability is essential for achieving long-term development goals, such as poverty reduction or the conditions for democracy and human rights (OECD, 2011). In order to be in line with a concept of partnership, we would expect that flexibility is introduced as a response to an equal concern that flexibility is needed, while also containing mutually agreed guidelines as to how such flexibility is managed. Only in this way, the criteria of participation and non-domination would be secured.

The need for flexibility – a mutual concern? Flexibility appears as a key concern in the EU's rationale for the new instrument for external relations. Not only does the proposal foresee to import the flexibility mechanisms from the EDF to on-budget resources (e.g. that unused funds could be carried over to the next year and that uncommitted funds could be allocated to other priorities), the Commission proposes to increase flexibility by creating a "cushion" to respond to short-term security and migration goals (Jones et al., 2018, p. 5). In its proposal, the European Commission (2018b) notes that:

> Recent reviews and evaluations of the external instruments have […] highlighted opportunities for improvements, in particular the need to simplify ways of working and to enable the EU to respond to unforeseen circumstances with greater flexibility […] to move resources to where they are needed as the international context changes.

This call for flexibility must be seen in the light of the multiple crises in the 2010s and the resulting pressure to use the EU's financial clout to react to these crises. The impact of the financial crisis, refugee crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic caused unforeseen challenges. Not least, the justification for introducing flexibility is tied to the EU's focus on migration. Migration made its entry to the EU's development arena after the 2015 refugee crisis. In the justification for the NDICI, migration appears as one of four thematic priorities for the financial instrument and is highly relevant in the context of flexibility:

> When new priorities emerged such as the migration/refugee crisis, problems were encountered trying to reallocate funds within the instruments under the budget as large quantities had been tied up in long-term programmes not allowing enough unallocated margin. […] flexibility needs to be enhanced (European Commission, 2018b, p. 6)

However, a reshuffling of monies (via a quantitatively substantial flexible reserve) to what the EU perceives as a short-term goal might not be the best alternative for the EU's partners. On the contrary, for the ACP group of states, predictability of funding has been a consistent concern and recurrent argument in its negotiations with the EU. For instance, predictability was a central concern when the EU and ACP negotiated the Cotonou agreement. The European Development Fund contained a "spending guarantee", which established how much each country would get from the fund and thereby ensured a high degree of predictability. Predictability of funding is established as one of the main principles for EU-ACP cooperation and codified in Article 56(1)c of the Cotonou agreement:

> Emphasise the importance of predictability and security in resource flows, granted on highly concessional terms and on a continuous basis (ACP & EU, 2000)

The EDF also ran multiannual financing cycles which ensured sustainability of funds in the medium and long-term, avoiding the pitfall of not being able to transfer unspent funds by the end of an annual budget. When the Commission proposed to move the EDF into the EU budget in 2003, the concern of losing predictability of funding was one of the main arguments against the proposal:

> Budgetisation of the EDF will mean, in practice, less certainty that funds will be permanently dedicated to ACP countries, and may lead to increased use of such funds for the Community's other global priorities […] Shifting priorities or fastmoving European agendas may also have a negative impact on development partners' requirements in terms of long-term planning and funding predictability […] reiterates the importance of the resource predictability offered by the

> current EDF, which facilitates long-term programming in ACP countries (ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly, 2004)

There is also evidence of a concern for predictability in partners' input to the EU's NDICI proposal. Stakeholder consultations with EU member states and partner states showed that there was a concern connected to creating too much flexibility of funding:

> It was also underlined that increasing flexibility should not come at the cost of less predictability, weaker country ownership and less focus on achieving long-term development objectives. To ensure flexibility and predictability, some respondents argued in favour of having sufficient reserves (European Commission, 2018b, p. 7)

In its mandate to the post-Cotonou negotiations, which took place in parallel and allowed the partners to voice priorities about the EU's new policy direction, the ACP further highlighted how predictability had been a highly valued part of the Cotonou agreement but was in need of further strengthening post-2020:

> The new Agreement must also strengthen the partnership's effectiveness with regard to development finance and predictability of financial flows […] By financing long-term development projects, the EDF has embedded into the partnership the principle of resource predictability, which is critical to long-term development. No other development cooperation instrument has established such elaborate, concrete, and positive relations (ACP, 2018, pp. 24-25)

The mandate does not highlight the need for further flexibility of resources to respond to emerging challenges. From the ACP side, this seemed to be adequately covered by the already flexible mechanisms of the EDF and was resisted. The EU has, however, incrementally pushed for inserting more flexibility in the EDF. For instance, the first revision of the Cotonou agreement introduced flexibility so that the "EU could unilaterally raise country allocations in case of exceptional circumstances" (Carbone, 2013, p. 126). Also, the EU decided to use EDF reserves to fund the Emergency trust fund for Africa (2015) and the European fund for sustainable development (2017) without formal consultation through ACP or joint ACP-EU structures (Keijzer, 2020).

In sum, the concern for introducing increased flexibility in EU budgeting seems to be a process that has advanced as part of a longer trend and that weighs heavier for the EU than for its partners. With the NDICI, flexibility is strengthened incrementally. Rather than tackling mutual concerns, we observe that the EU has unilaterally introduced additional flexibility in their funding instruments. Hence it is not possible to substantiate that the EU is operating in a non-dominating manner through focusing on mutual concerns. The strengthening of flexibility of funding shows that the EU makes decisions that affect their partners with only limited possibilities for them to discuss these changes. While the EU conducted stakeholder consultations on the NDICI, most input came from European stakeholders: 78% of respondents came from organisations within the European Union (European Commission, 2018a, p. 41). Furthermore, some stakeholders have addressed concerns regarding the governance and accountability of the reserve fund. It remains unclear what criteria and procedures are envisaged for using these unallocated funds and whether such decisions will be made by the EU alone or in collaboration with its partners (Jones et al., 2018). While flexibility may be important to be able to respond adequately to short-term needs, without an established agreement on how the reallocations of funds should be managed or decided on, flexibility opens a larger room for power-seeking manoeuvres by the more powerful partner. Hence, flexibility signifies an increased risk of domination.

Tension 2: EU-inclusive vs. partner-inclusive decision-making

When it comes to determining whether the EU is operating in a non-dominating manner and allowing for a participatory approach, the issue of decision-making is central. EU decision-making in external action tends to be a cumbersome process involving various EU actors at different stages from the decision over funds to programming. These processes tend to be EU-centric (Steingass, 2021). An exception was the EDF, which operated outside the EU budget. While funding decisions were taken by the member states in a special committee, programming and implementation of EDF monies included the direct participation of partners' governments through joint management of the allotted resources, as outlined in previous ACP partnership agreements. The reform of the finance instruments, including the integration of the EDF into the EU budget, and the decoupling of the post-Cotonou ACP-EU partnership agreement (Carbone, 2021), affects these processes in terms of which actors participate and which rules and conditions apply to whom.

Enhancing internal legitimacy and transparency of EU development policy? On the EU's side, the integration of the EDF has an effect on decision-making. The EDF excluded any role for the European Parliament. Abolishing the EDF and integrating the funding of geographical cooperation with ACP countries into the EU's budget ("budgetisation") implies that the EP is given co-legislation and oversight in the EU's development policy in the ACP geographic context. EDF money comes primarily in geographical envelopes as assistance to third countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and the South Pacific. Thus, the reform gives the Council and the Parliament co-legislative powers over all development cooperation and implies supranational elements of decision-making.

The role of parliaments has traditionally been limited in the realm of foreign policy. Foreign policy was for long considered an executive prerogative due to the need of making short-term strategic decisions. Furthermore, foreign policy decisions are seldom enacted through legislation, which makes parliamentary scrutiny and involvement even less prominent than in most other policy areas (Rosén & Stie, 2017). Yet, the role of the European Parliament in the EU's external relations has expanded incrementally (Stavridis & Irrera, 2015). For internal EU decision-making, the budgetisation of the EDF implies increased scrutiny powers for the European Parliament and democratic oversight, which contributes to increased transparency and accountability, and hence the legitimacy of development cooperation. For instance, the NDICI includes a high-level political dialogue with the EP on the implementation of NDICI funds and promises to "take full account of MEPs' positions" (European Parliament, 2021, pp. 1-2). It is therefore unsurprising that, as then chair of the development committee in the Parliament, Linda McAvan announced, the EP "welcomed" the budgetisation of the EDF (Chadwick, 2018), which it had advocated since 1973 (Mackie et al., 2004, p. 17).

Such streamlining of funding for international cooperation potentially strengthens the public legitimacy of the EU's assistance. The question for discussion is then, to what extent is *internal* legitimacy necessary for strong international partnerships. As Burni, Keijzer, and Erforth (2020) suggest, "while a bigger role for the EP could be good news for more democratised decision-making, it is not clear whether it will actually benefit development goals". The EP's voice has generally been in favour of focusing on poverty reduction and gender mainstreaming (Delputte & Verschaeve, 2015). Yet, the larger role for the EP also makes cooperation more prone to political trends represented by the shifting orientations of the European Parliament (Raunio & Wagner, 2021).

But weakening the foundation for the EU-ACP partnership? Moving the EDF from a member state to EU competence also has implications for other actors beyond the EU, especially the EDF-receiving partners in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. The ACP has been an important critic of the budgetisation proposal. In their mandate for the post-2020 partnership agreement with the EU, the group stated that they were “strongly in favour of maintaining the European Development Fund (EDF) as the main financial instrument in support of ACP-EU development cooperation” (ACP, 2018, p. 25). They noted that “one of its unique features is the fact that it is managed outside of the general EU budget” and that “the EDF has fostered a particular culture that has made the ACP-EU partnership a unique development cooperation model” (ACP, 2018, p. 25).

Another aspect of the NDICI that questions the extent to which it is enhancing partnerships is the EU’s increased inclusion of input-targets. These are targets for spending that are already set out in the NDICI proposal. For instance, the EU commits to using 20% of ODA for social inclusion, including gender equality and women’s empowerment, 25% for climate change and 10% for migration (European Commission, 2018b, pp. 19-22). While there have been some consultations with partners and stakeholders on the proposal, the inclusion of set input-targets for thematic spending do not seem flexible to partner countries and stakeholders’ viewpoints. Such targets may therefore negatively affect country ownership, as EU priorities are not necessarily in line with the partners priorities (Jones & Keijzer, 2021).

The EU and ACP also developed common institutions, which underpin the ACP-EU partnership, and which have the potential for partner-inclusive decision-making. These are primarily the ACP-EU Council of Ministers, the ACP-EU Committee of Ambassadors and the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly (JPA). Early on, this governance mode in which “ACP countries would provide the policy and administrative framework while the EU would provide financial and technical assistance to support the implementation” (Mackie et al., 2004, p. 22) was hailed as model also due to this partner-inclusive decision-making (Arts & Dickson, 2004). While this may have been an overstatement of the partnership dimension of the time (Drieghe, 2020; Ravenhill, 1985), with the Treaty on European Union at Maastricht, the pendulum swung towards more EU-inclusive decision-making. While the EDF remained outside the EU budget and the concept of joint management of administration and delivery of aid has been largely preserved (Mackie et al., 2004, p. 22), development cooperation more generally became an EU competence. Therefore, funding decisions beyond the EDF were subject to European parliamentary co-decision, which has also concerned funding for ACP countries, e.g., through thematic budget lines. At the same time, research questioned existing joint institutions for their value of partner-inclusive decision-making through deliberation despite power asymmetry (Delputte & Williams, 2016), and, over time, the EU’s valuation of these joint institutions eroded (European Commission, 2016), until they were partly scraped in the post-Cotonou deal (Carbone, 2021).

While the Commission criticised limited input from the ACP group to these institutions (European Commission, 2016, pp. 102-103), the ACP continued to emphasise the value of joint institutions. In its mandate for post-Cotonou the ACP writes:

> The role of joint institutions […] remain valid and strategic in the management of EDF resources within the framework of high level dialogue on matters of mutual interest […] negotiations should also explore the strengthening of institutions at the regional and continental levels, especially it relates to decision-making and representation during implementation (ACP, 2018, p. 26)

In addition, the ACP mandate states that political dialogue should play a "central role in securing a common understanding and commitments" in the implementation of resources (ACP, 2018, p. 27). Then, an ambition for partnerships would call for their improvement not abolishment.

However, participation and non-domination do not only come in the form of direct involvement of the partners. In accordance with the concept of partnership outlined above, a participatory approach includes giving a broad set of affected parties a due hearing, for example, through joint institutions and inclusive standing bodies for civil society participation. Government-to-government relations do not represent the understanding of partnerships that has developed in context of ownership (Keijzer & Black, 2020), which is multidimensional. While avenues for participation have been introduced in EU free trade agreements through the so-called civil society mechanisms (Drieghe, Orbie, Potjomkina, & Shahin, 2021), there is no discussion of establishing similar procedures in the Commission's proposal for the new NDICI. In the Commission's proposal, civil society and local authorities are envisaged to play a role during the "design, implementation and associated monitoring processes of programmes" (European Commission, 2018b, p. 31). The envisaged role for civil society throughout the proposal is either connected to co-determination of programming or civil society as recipients of EU assistance. Yet, in accordance with a concept of partnership, we expect joint decision-making to go beyond programming.

Another key aspect is to what extent different rules, procedures and conditions were forced upon partners as a result of a multitude of differing institutional rules that lack transparency and accountability. This question has been discussed under the principle of alignment and shows in the tension between donor coordination and alignment to partner systems (Saltnes, 2019). It remains an open question to what extent the new instrument can achieve what it promises when the Commission states: "Instead of focusing on multiple programming processes, debates would be more focused on political objectives and engagement with external partners" (European Commission, 2018b, p. 10). In this way, the instrument enhances participation indirectly as it has less programming requirements and conditions attached as is currently the case with the EDF and the other instruments for external action.

In sum, we observe that while the reform of funding shows potential to enhance transparency and accountability within the EU by extending powers, especially oversight of funding, to the European Parliament and, indirectly, civil society oversight of EU spending, these changes to enhance EU-inclusive decision-making come at the cost of excluding the EU's partners. For the EU to comply with a concept of partnership, as outlined here, the Union would have to integrate and strengthen avenues and mechanisms for including civil society and other stakeholders in partner countries in their decision-making procedures.

Conclusions

The article has concentrated on the EU's approach to partnership with the global south in the light of the Von der Leyen Commission's renewed emphasis on partnership. While the EU's ambition is often dismissed as empty rhetoric, we argue that the EU's revitalised partnership rhetoric must be taken seriously. This is because the proposed changes to the EU's external financial architecture have implications for the EU's partners. Hence, these changes warrant further investigation and analysis. The article also makes a more general contribution. We theoretically anchor the ambition to establish a partnership and we develop an empirically relevant operationalisation. Our definition of partnership is not exhaustive but is anchored in a minimum required for a non-dominant and participatory partnership policy. In light of this conceptualisation, we analyse what implications the EU's decoupling of the partnership agreement and financial instrument post-2020 has for the EU's partners.

We find that the overhaul of the EU's financial architecture creates tensions between flexibility and predictability of funding and between EU and partner-inclusive decision-making. These tensions suggest that the reform of the financial instruments is unlikely to contribute towards a non-dominant and participatory partnership policy. While we discuss partnership with reference to the Global Europe Instrument, our conceptualisation is relevant for other elements of the EU's development policy. For instance, the EU's human rights and democracy conditionality is executive-driven and lacks mechanisms for the inclusion of stakeholders beyond partner governments (Saltnes, 2021). Furthermore, the EU's promotion of LGBTI rights and the International Criminal Court has been contested by African counterparts (Del Biondo, 2020; Saltnes & Thiel, 2021; Thiel, 2021). What is beyond the scope of the presented conceptualisation is how these reforms affect the effectiveness of the EU's cooperation policy. The relationship between partnership, conditionality and effectiveness has been contested since the outset of the common development and cooperation policy (Dimier, 2021).

Our discussion shows how the protracted tensions between flexibility and predictability of funding and between EU and partner-inclusive decision-making of the institutional reforms contribute towards existing trends in the EU's cooperation with third countries. In particular, we observe that the introduction of flexibility is justified with a need to be able to react to short-term priorities, such as migration (Bergmann et al., 2019). This points in the direction of a foreign policy logic and reduced potential for a "distinctive" external policy of the EU. Based on our observations, we can also make some suggestions about what drives this continued undermining of genuine partnership. The strengthening of the EU's diplomatic services, the EEAS, and the European Parliament in EU external relations have shown that, while decision-making is moving away from Commission control, it becomes embroiled in the EU's decision-making logic, including its bureaucratic turf wars. Thus, we suggest that EU-centred institutional competition over precious means of implementing external policies makes partnerships more difficult to achieve. This is because it comes with a lack of attention for external participation, for example, with a view to EU institutional accountability requirements, and risks partners' ownership. Partners remain only involved at the implementation stage, especially agreeing on a financial framework and the so-called programming. It is subject to further research how the involvement of partners, including non-state actors and civil society in the global south, during the implementation and evaluation of the NDICI feeds back into the EU's decision-making to assess the effect of the institutional changes on external participation.

Power imbalances between international partners exist inevitably and may vary from one policy area to another. Hence, we suggest that limiting our analyses of partnerships to power imbalances is inadequate. As a counter, we suggest focusing on non-domination and participation as minimum conditions for realising partnerships. Partnerships may be formed despite asymmetrical differences in capacities, power or financial clout but depend on partners not imposing their will on others and allowing for collaborative arrangements whereby affected parties would be given a due hearing. Thus, our conceptualisation of partnership has a wider relevance. It can serve as a starting point for analysing EU external relations, which has for some time become populated with an ambition for partnerships, and for international cooperation more generally.

Notes

1. Cf "Partnership in Africa: The Yaoundé Association" (European Community Information Service, 1966).
2. Henceforth we use the term "NDICI – Global Europe instrument" and "NDICI" interchangeably.
3. Until 2020 known as the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific group of states (ACP). Henceforth, we use the term ACP to refer to this group of states.

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