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Making a difference in multilateral negotiations: the European Union and the global agenda on aid effectiveness

Maurizio Carbone

School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

ABSTRACT

This article argues that the European Union (EU) can make a difference in multilateral negotiations, yet its external impact is likely to be more significant not when it has a high internal capability, and the systemic context is favourable, but rather when a policy entrepreneur (be it the European Commission alone or in concert with some member states) acts purposefully to push the EU's common position forward. To reach this conclusion, it traces the trajectory of the aid effectiveness norm through a series of high-level forums held in the 2000s and early 2010s. The illusion that the EU could shape global discourse and affect decisions in international settings did not last long, as its attempts to enhance the quality of aid were replaced in the mid-2010s by a stronger emphasis on the promotion of its economic and political interest.

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1. Introduction

In development policy, perhaps more than in other areas, the European Union (EU) is a *sui generis* entity: it is a *bilateral* donor but also a producer of *collective* norms and procedural rules, and it exercises competence *alongside* its member states but also has the ambition of playing a coordinating role *over* national development policies (Bodenstein, Faust, & Furness, 2017; Carbone, 2007; Verschaeve & Orbie, 2018). These two dimensions have garnered some academic attention, with a particular interest in “how Europe hits home”, essentially the extent to which national policies are subject to Europeanisation pressures (Carbone & Orbie, 2017). The question of “how Europe hits abroad”, specifically whether and in what ways the EU as a collective actor shapes global discourse on development and affects decisions in multilateral settings, has attracted less scholarly interest. Some studies argue that, more often than not, the EU (as a bilateral donor) has followed trends set by international organizations, so much so that it is a “norm taker” rather than a “norm maker” (Farrell, 2008; Orbie et al., 2017; Verschaeve & Orbie, 2018). Other studies maintain that the EU (as a collective actor) has played a leading role in promoting the agenda on financing for development, starting from the international conference held in Monterrey in March 2002, and helped

CONTACT Maurizio Carbone  maurizio.carbone@glasgow.ac.uk

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shape discussions resulting in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted in September 2015 and the subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Carbone, 2007; Holden, 2020; Orbie, 2020). Interestingly, its contribution to the thorny issue of aid effectiveness is contested: some claim that it is a driving force (e.g. Carbone, 2013; Lightfoot & Kim, 2017), while others disregard its role (e.g. Abdel-Malek, 2015; Atwood, 2012; Brown, 2020).

Against this background, this article asks two interlinked research questions: to what extent is the EU able to make a difference in international development negotiations, and what explains the variation in its external impact? To answer these questions, it develops an analytical framework, primarily engaging with the literature interested in the behaviour of the EU in the international arena. Departing from the concept of actorhood, scholars have identified different factors that affect the EU's ability to reach its objectives and influence outcomes across different policy areas (e.g. da Conceição-Heldt & Meunier, 2014; Drieskens, 2017; Jørgensen, 2009; Niemann & Bretherton, 2013), yet they have paid little attention to agency (Schunz & Damro, 2020). This article further contributes to the literature on international aid governance: various scholars have investigated the role of actors in setting rules and norms and have offered different perspectives on aid effectiveness, but they have not considered the EU (e.g. Brown, 2020; Chaturvedi et al., 2021). Empirically, it sheds light on the trajectory of the aid effectiveness norm in four high-level forums (HLFs) held in Rome (2003), Paris (2005), Accra (2008) and Busan (2011), as well as their follow-ups in the 2010s, but with a focus on the EU's contribution. To do so, it draws on official documents, unpublished memos, reports of specialized media, analyses of delegates to meetings, and, most importantly, two cycles of interviews. The first cycle, conducted in April–June 2009 and June–September 2012, involved 32 senior officials from the EU (supranational institutions and member states) and other international policymakers who were directly involved in the four HLF negotiations: most of them participated in two, in some cases three, and in a few cases four negotiation rounds. A second cycle, conducted between January 2019 and March 2020, included 10 people, which improved understanding of the legacy of the aid effectiveness agenda in the 2010s.¹

This article is divided into four parts. Following this introduction, the second part presents the analytical framework, the third part covers the empirical component, and the fourth part discusses the main findings. Basically, it is argued that the EU can make a difference in multilateral (development) negotiations, with its external impact likely to be more significant not when it has a high internal capability and the systemic context is favourable, but rather when a policy entrepreneur – be it the European Commission (EC) alone or together with one or more EU member states – acts purposefully to push the EU's common position forward.

2. Analytical framework: making a difference in multilateral negotiations

The European Union has been involved in an array of multilateral negotiations, ranging from trade to environment, from migration to foreign and security policy. Building on different strands of the literature, this section proposes an analytical framework to better understand whether and how the EU makes a difference in multilateral negotiations or, to put it differently, has an external impact. It starts from the *explanandum*,

that is, external impact, discussing definition and measurement, and then focuses on a set of explanatory factors, specifically internal capability, systemic context, and most importantly, policy entrepreneurship. Two notes of caution are in order. First, the proposed analytical framework is not deterministic in nature but probabilistic at best and offers plausible explanations for the EU's behaviour in multilateral negotiations (Schunz & Damro, 2020; Thomas, 2012). Second, when studying the factors that affect external impact, there is trade-off between parsimony and richness (Niemann & Bretherton, 2013): the choice here is that of parsimony.

2.1. Explanandum: definition and measurement of external impact

For a long time, a large majority of scholars interested in the EU as a global actor assumed that actorness, which culminated with the adoption of a common position, was sufficient for the EU to affect multilateral negotiations (e.g. Drieskens, 2017). When attention shifted from actorness to effectiveness, a number of variables started being considered, yet a narrow definition of effectiveness was, and still continues to be, employed: in fact, the predominant understanding is in terms of *goal achievement*, which refers to the extent to which the EU achieves the goals it sets for itself (Jørgensen, Oberthür, & Shahin, 2011) or the extent to which the EU's objectives are reflected in international outcomes (Oberthür & Groen, 2015). A shortcoming of this approach is that the EU may indeed be effective but not make a difference in international negotiations. Another possibility, therefore, is to understand effectiveness in terms of *problem-solving*, which, for scholars of international regimes, refers to the degree of progress in solving the problem for which the regime was originally created (Underdal, 2002; Young, 1994). An attempt to address the consequences of what the EU does internationally was made by Ginsberg (2001, p. 2), who proposed the notion of political impact to refer to “the ability to affect what others do” directly or indirectly through structural changes. The notion of *external impact*, embraced in this article, captures both the EU's ability to reach its objectives (goal achievement) and the consequences of its action (problem-solving), but also, as shown below, takes into account the process of multilateral negotiations: external impact, therefore, looks at the effect rather than the effectiveness of the EU (Rhinarid & Sjøstedt, 2019).

The next step is how to measure external impact. A possibility, widely used in EU studies, would be to consider outputs and outcomes, that is, to compare what the EU set out to achieve at the outset of negotiations with the final document produced (Jørgensen et al., 2011; Oberthür & Groen, 2015). This approach, however, is problematic for various reasons: first, objectives may be, or may be shrewdly, formulated in broad and abstract terms to leave more margin of manoeuvre to the negotiators; second, outcomes in multilateral negotiations may be determined not just by the sum of the contributions of different actors, but also by their interaction; and third, a linear relationship between outputs and outcomes must not be assumed. A remedy to these difficulties, taken up in this article, is to also consider the process through which actors pursue their (stated and unstated) goals. By doing so (and here, the use of interviews is fundamental), it is possible to derive a reasonably reliable sense of how negotiations are conducted and possibly what would have happened without the EU. Furthermore, examining the process can reveal how an actor may have initially set limited ambitions, but then adjusted these and

have a significant effect in the negotiations (Gutner & Thompson, 2010; van Willigen & Kleistra, 2013). On the basis of all these considerations, one can establish how significant, or insignificant, the EU's external impact is: indeed, the external impact is not binary but, in line with a parsimonious approach, here it is posited that it is either significant (when progress in tackling the challenge at hand is in line, or largely in line, with the proposals advanced by the EU) or insignificant (when the EU's proposal did not contribute, or only marginally contributed, to progress in tackling the challenge at hand).

2.2. Explanatory factors: internal cohesion, international context and policy entrepreneurship

The first category of explanatory factors is related to the EU's capacity to formulate, and then deliver on, its negotiation position. The natural starting point is the concept of actorness and the associated criteria that have been proposed over the years for establishing the status of the EU as a global actor. Some have emphasized authority, which considers the level of competence delegated to the EU either formally or informally; autonomy, which is the extent to which the EU is distinct from its member states; and recognition, which entails that other actors, starting with its member states, accept engaging with or through the EU (Jupille & Caporaso, 1998; Sjöstedt, 1977). Others have mostly focused on the EU's ability to speak with one voice, arguing that unity makes strength (e.g. van Schaik, 2013). All these different kinds of criteria can be subsumed under a more encompassing notion of *internal capability*, which, going back to Sjöstedt (1977), refers to the EU's autonomous capacity, thus including adequate means, to formulate and implement a collective position without being undermined by its member states – nor by supranational institutions (Thomas, 2012). Two important issues are worth noting: first, not preference homogeneity is paramount but unity in external representation, which results from the preference congruence of all EU actors vis-à-vis other actors in the negotiations (van Schaik, 2013); and second, EU actors need not share the same commitment to a set of interests or norms, but they must manifest a willingness to cooperate on international affairs, or at least not to undermine the (formal or informal) common position (Thomas, 2012).

The second category of explanatory factors refers to the *systemic context*, which may be favourable or unfavourable to the EU's external actions. On the one hand, there are general aspects to be considered, for instance, the international constellation of interests: traditionally, this meant taking into account the position of the USA in the negotiations, but the rise of emerging powers and the increased agency of developing countries have gradually shifted the global balance of power and engendered a more multipolar world. On the other hand, there are issue-specific considerations owing to the context in which the EU acts. Attention is often focused on the decision-making rule, which may favour conservative rather than reformist agendas, but other factors also affect negotiations, namely the number and complexity of issues under discussion, the presence of pre-existing rules and coalitions, or the power of the chair (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006; da Conceição-Heldt & Meunier, 2014; Oberthür & Groen, 2018; Rhinard & Sjöstedt, 2019).

High internal capability and a favourable systemic context, even when they materialize simultaneously, still cannot guarantee significant EU external impact. In this sense, one of the weaknesses of the literature on actorness and effectiveness is that it pays little heed

to agency (Schunz & Damro, 2020), to the point that Bretherton and Vogler (2006, p. 24) even argued that by “virtue of its existence” the EU would be able “to exert influence beyond its border”. Instead, it is posited here that the likelihood of the EU’s external impact increases in the presence of a *policy entrepreneur* – which often is the EC, and in fewer cases, the EU Presidency, acting in concert with different member states (Carbone, 2007). Policy entrepreneurs first need to see whether a problem requires some sort of action; alternatively, they may deem that the EU’s external engagement is not desirable or that action can be taken by member states on their own (Schunz & Damro, 2020). Then, they must gain support for their proposals, engaging in outreach activities to circumvent deadlocks and build alliances (Dee, 2013; Kilian & Elgström, 2010; Oberthür & Groen, 2018; Parker & Karlsson, 2010; Romanyshyn, 2015; Steingass 2020). Less relevant but still of some importance are the reasons why policy entrepreneurs pursue a certain agenda, which indeed may be norm-driven or interest-driven, or a certain course of action – in this regard, rather than looking at the “mechanics” of the EU’s outreach in detail, it is sufficient to examine the extent to which such diplomatic engagement facilitates the achievement of the EU’s objectives in a particular context (Rhinard & Sjöstedt, 2019; Schunz & Damro, 2020).

Two key ingredients for impactful policy entrepreneurship are ambition and credibility. *Ambition* can be discerned by looking at the distance between the EU’s negotiation position on the one hand and that of other relevant actors or the status quo on the other hand. The EU may achieve its objectives, but its actual impact on international negotiations may be insignificant because of its modest agenda. Ambitious positions, generally, entail support – or, at least, not open resistance – by member states and supranational institutions; they are those which propose change, so it can be expected that reformist positions require stronger outreach activities. Conversely, lack of ambition generally reflects divisions between member states or the absence of initiatives from the EC or the EU Presidency (Dee, 2013; Jørgensen et al., 2011). *Credibility* refers to the quality of being believable and trustworthy. It depends on the perceived ability of an actor to deliver on what it pledges and/or its compliance record with previous commitments. Therefore, the EU may be ambitious, but its international aspirations must be matched by “domestic” policies demonstrating that it really does what it preaches. Furthermore, it must be perceived as having not just the resources but also the political will to deliver and thus must seek to minimize any possible clashes between its member states, as third parties tend to exploit intra-EU divisions (Oberthür & Groen, 2015; Kilian & Elgström, 2010; Parker & Karlsson, 2010; Steingass, 2020).

3. Empirical discussion: the EU and the global agenda on aid effectiveness

The analytical framework presented in the previous section is used in this section to discuss the EU’s impact on the construction of the global agenda on aid effectiveness, which has been a major area of contention in international development. Until the late 1990s, blame for weak development results was placed mostly, if not solely, on recipient countries for their unsound macroeconomic frameworks and poor governance structures. In the early 2000s, part of the responsibility shifted to donors, who recognized that they needed to address the consequences of aid fragmentation (Brown, 2020; Carbone, 2010). Much of the initial discussion was conducted under the aegis of the

Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Following a first interlocutory meeting in Rome in 2003, the second high-level forum on aid effectiveness, held in Paris in 2005, launched an ambitious agenda resting on five seminal principles (ownership, alignment, harmonization, managing for results, and mutual accountability), which was further refined at the third HLF in 2008 in Accra. The fourth HLF, held in Busan in 2011, adjusted the core principles (ownership of development priorities by developing countries, focus on results, inclusive development partnerships, transparency and accountability to each other), and further extended to development effectiveness by including other means of development cooperation beyond foreign aid. Yet its significance lied principally in the attempt to integrate emerging powers (notably China, India, Brazil) into the existing global governance for development (Abdel-Malek, 2015; Brown, 2020; Carbone, 2010; Hyden, 2008; Rogerson, 2005). This part of the article examines these four HLFs from the EU's perspective, looking into whether and how the EU affected different outcome documents and considering the three explanatory factors for the EU's external impact in turn: internal capability, systemic context, and policy entrepreneurship.

3.1. HLF-1 (2003): Rome declaration on harmonization

The EU did not formulate a common position in view of the first HLF in Rome (24–25 February 2003), whose main objective was that of harmonizing donor procedures and practices with a view to reducing transactions for recipient countries. Promoting aid harmonization was also one of the EU collective commitments made in the context of the 2002 Monterrey conference on financing for development,² but attention initially concentrated on the volume of aid and other sources of development financing (Carbone, 2007; Interviews 1 and 2, April 2009). The only active bilateral donor was the UK, which worked closely with the World Bank rather than with other EU member states (Interviews 27, 29 and 33, April–June 2009).³ The Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden, as well as Norway) were happy with their level of coordination on the ground, and were thus sceptical of any attempt towards EU-led coordination (Interviews 16, 18 and 19, May–June 2009). Germany was suspicious that “the European Commission would push the EU as a whole to focus on budget support and make this the central component of the aid effectiveness agenda” (Interview 15, May 2009; see also Interviews 16 and 17, May–June 2009).

The systemic context was potentially favourable. The USA and Japan were not supportive of aid coordination and were in fact rather passive throughout. A common initiative from the EU, which could have capitalized on the success achieved in the context of the Monterrey conference (Carbone, 2007), would probably have met little resistance in a HLF that was attended only by DAC donors and some international organizations (Interviews 2, 3 and 29, April–May 2009; Interview 20, June 2012). However, the EC did not act as a policy entrepreneur as it had done in the case of the Monterrey conference, because it was more preoccupied with the implementation of that agenda; furthermore, as admitted by an EU official, “we had just completed a major administrative reform, and the EC had not yet established itself as a credible development actor” (Interview 3, April 2009). The Greek Presidency was rather weak, limiting its role to announcing a set of recommendations to be soon proposed by the European Commission (Interviews 2, 3 and 28, April 2009).

The impact of the EU at HLF-1 (Rome), therefore, was insignificant. The adoption of the *Rome Declaration on Harmonisation* marked the start of the global agenda on aid effectiveness, also thanks to the creation of the Working Party on Aid Effectiveness and Donor Practices (WP-EFF), operating within the DAC, which played an important coordinating role in subsequent HLFs (de Milly, 2011). Without agreeing on specific commitments and indicators, the importance of the HLF in Rome rests in the fact that, for the first time in a ministerial-level declaration, “blame for disappointing results shifted from recipients to donors” (Interview 28, April 2009; see also de Milly, 2011).

3.2. HLF-2 (2005): Paris declaration on aid effectiveness

The EU did not adopt a formal common position ahead of the second HLF in Paris (28 February–2 March 2005), yet much discussion, often heated, took place in the Council for most of 2004. Following the adoption of a working paper on aid coordination by the EC as a follow-up to the Monterrey conference,⁴ an Ad Hoc Working Party on Harmonization produced a report containing a series of actions on coordination and harmonization, notably on multi-annual joint programming, cross-country and within-country complementarity, and common implementation procedures, starting from a group of pilot countries (Council of the European Union, 2004a). This report, however, was only “endorsed” by the Council in November 2004 (Council of the European Union, 2004b), reflecting substantial divisions among EU member states on what aid effectiveness meant and entailed. On the one hand, there was the group of Nordic countries, which “were jealous of their coordination and division of labour” (Interview 6, May 2009; see also Saltnes, 2019), and the UK, “which was sceptical about the role of the EU on aid coordination” (Interview 29, May 2009). On the other hand, countries in southern Europe feared the introduction of significant changes to their not-so-effective development policies, though they were ready to accept a leading role for the EU in this area (Interviews 4 and 17, April–June 2009; Interviews 10 and 20, June–July 2012; see also Saltnes, 2019).⁵ These divergences were not reconciled ahead of the HLF in Paris, so internal capability, at least initially, was not very high, as admitted by a European official: “There were many fights in the preparation for Paris, it was a problem of personalities: it was mostly the European Commission versus some Nordic states, which were not used to having another player trying to lead in this field” (Interview 17, June 2009; see also Interviews 15, 16, 18 and 19, May–June 2009).

The context in which the EU operated was not favourable. The USA and Japan were ready to accept an outcome document that would propose some general principles, but opposed the inclusion of specific targets and indicators, for instance, on donor coordination, use of recipient country systems, and untying of aid (Interviews 30 and 35, May–June 2009). Incidentally, neither France, which hosted the HLF, nor Germany, which seemed more aligned with the USA on many issues, were particularly active (Interviews 7, 27 and 28, April–June 2009). The venue in which the negotiations took place did not help: in the words of an EU official, “we tried to lead, but there was resistance, I would say not so much from the DAC Secretariat, but from a DAC culture, as DAC delegates reported the views of their governments” (Interview 2, April 2009). In fact, EU member states initially presented their different visions on aid effectiveness without any attempt to

coordinate (Interviews 2, 3, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19, April–June 2009). As an EU official stated, “the EU did not speak with one voice: I would not call it cacophony, but I would not call it classical harmonious symphony either: it was something in between” (Interview 3, April 2009). Eventually, the scenario changed, with “an unprecedented alliance between the European Commission and the Nordic countries, and that tipped the balance in the negotiations” (Interview 28, April 2009).⁶

The impact of the European Union at HLF-2 (Paris) was significant. The EC succeeded in bringing together the EU member states, drawing on the report of the Ad Hoc Working Party on Harmonization: “a common position was developed on the spot, which was eventually read by the Luxembourg Presidency on behalf of the European Union” (Interview 3, April 2009; see also Keijzer & Verschaevé, 2018).⁷ In the words of a European official from one of the Nordic countries: “Originally, we were sceptical about anything the European Commission proposed. But eventually, we recognized that we did not have the political clout to change things, so elevating this issue to the EU level was key to making progress at the international level” (Interview 19, June 2009). Interestingly, a British official admitted that “without the EU, and without the European Commission, we would not have achieved what we did in Paris. For the first time in DAC-led negotiations, the EU did not just coincide with the European Commission, but it was something bigger” (Interview 29, May 2009).⁸ The *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* represented “a significant juncture in the history of development assistance and co-operation” (Hyden, 2008, p. 259) as it contained not only a set of common principles but also a series of concrete goals and targets for donors to coordinate and harmonize their aid policies, which in large part reflected the EU’s stances. Nevertheless, the EU unilaterally announced some additional commitments, which in the words of a European official, “showed how ambitious we were about aid effectiveness, and I think this enhanced our credibility as a development actor” (Interview 9, June 2012).

3.3. HLF-3 (2008): Accra agenda for action

The EU adopted a common position well in advance of the third HLF in Accra (2–4 September 2008). Building on the positive contribution to HLF-2 (Paris), the EC organized a series of technical seminars to refine the EU’s common position. The Nordic countries and the UK were adamant about further developing and operationalizing the aid effectiveness agenda, particularly on alignment and transparency (Interviews 16, 18, 19 and 29, May–June 2009). France and Germany were more active this time: Germany was instrumental in the promotion of division of labour; France, at the helm of the EU Presidency, worked hard to ensure the coordination of EU positions, though it was not as involved in the substance of the negotiations (Interviews 15 and 17, May–June 2009). Eventually, an ambitious agreement was found on four broad priorities: to accelerate progress on division of labour, to enhance the use of recipient country systems, to improve the predictability of aid, and to promote mutual accountability for results (Council of the European Union, 2008; *Agence Europe*, 27 August 2008). The high level of EU internal capability was exemplified by the unprecedented words used by a representative of the Nordic group, the Swedish state secretary for international development Joakim Stymme: “The EU is the world’s largest donor but it doesn’t always feel that way. We

don't always understand we are part of the world's largest donor community and we don't always act that way" (*Inter Press Service*, 31 July 2008).

The context in which the negotiations in Accra took place was more favourable than it had been in Paris. True, the USA and Japan sought to dilute commitments to adopt specific targets by a given date and intransigently opposed the idea of using recipient country systems and ending the practice of tying aid (*Agence Europe*, 27 August 2008; *European Voice*, 28 August 2008; *Financial Times*, 3 September 2008; *European Report*, 4 September 2008; Interviews 30 and 35, May–June 2009). An EU official lamented how these two countries "even tried to backtrack from what we had achieved in Paris" (Interview 7, June 2009). One of the most important novelties of this HLF was the stronger agency of developing countries, which requested that donors make time-bound commitments on reducing conditionalities, increasing aid predictability, and untying aid. Importantly, they perceived the EU as an ally in their battle against the regressive positions of the USA and Japan (*Inter Press Service*, 2 September 2008; Schultz, 2011; Interviews 2, 3, 27 and 28, April 2009).

The European Union had a significant impact on the adoption of the *Accra Agenda for Action*, which contained some time-bound commitments largely reflecting the EU's common position: using country systems as the first option for aid programmes; making aid more predictable and transparent; placing a stronger emphasis on mutual accountability; and reducing aid fragmentation by working more towards an in-country and cross-country division of labour (Abdel-Malek, 2015). This was a surprising conclusion, as the draft outcome document, to the disappointment of developing countries and civil society organizations, "fell short in terms of precise mechanisms and time-bound commitments", as indicated in early August 2008 in a letter sent by France on behalf of the EU to the chair of the WP-EFF (*European Voice*, 28 August 2008; see also Interviews 31 and 32, May 2009). In fact, when the draft outcome document was ready to be signed at the Ministerial session, several EU ministers, as well as the then European Commissioner for Development Louis Michel, manifested their discontent publicly, arguing that "the text that had been prepared at technical level lacked ambition" (Interview 10, July 2012; see also *New Europe*, 8 September 2008; Abdel-Malek, 2015; Fejerskov & Keijzer, 2013). The EC and the EU Presidency then acted in concert: first, they asked to reopen negotiations, which met resistance from the USA, "not least because they did not have any heavyweights coming to the meeting" (Interview 2, April 2009); and second, they built an alliance with developing countries and managed to have significant changes introduced into the text "after lively last-minute negotiations" (de Milly, 2011, p. 260; see also Interviews 2, 3 and 17, April–June 2009). Ultimately, the EU's intervention, thanks to the policy entrepreneurship of the EC and the EU Presidency, was crucial in adopting "something of more importance to developing countries than any pontificating about aid in a Group of Eight summit" (*Financial Times*, 7 September 2008).⁹

3.4. HLF-4 (2011): Busan partnership for effective development cooperation

The EU adopted a common position two weeks before the fourth HLF in Busan (29 November–1 December 2011). Internal capability, apparently, was high, owing to the fact that "various technical seminars on every possible topic" (Interview 10, July 2012)

were organized by the EC in relation to an operational framework on aid effectiveness agreed upon as a follow-up to the commitments made in Paris and Accra. Yet, some scepticism started emerging, particularly on what the focus of the Busan meeting was going to be (Fejerskov & Keijzer, 2013; Lightfoot & Kim, 2017; Schulz, 2011). A group of member states facing severe economic crises (e.g. Italy, Ireland and Spain) opposed new commitments on untying aid and alignment to recipient country systems (Interviews 8, 9, 20 and 22, June–September 2012). The UK was not adamant on further coordination at the EU level, arguing that “there is a clear value for money rationale in greater EU coordination”, yet any “any such initiatives should be respectful of EU Member States’ sovereign decisions on where and at what level to provide aid” (*New Europe*, 28 November 2011; see also Interviews 38 and 40, July–September 2012). France and Germany maintained that without any commitment from China and India, it would not be opportune to make further pledges on aid effectiveness (D + C, November 2011; Interviews 8, 9 and 36, June 2012). The only EU member states which showed some interest in advancing the aid effectiveness agenda were, once again, the Nordics (Interviews 10 and 21, June–July 2012). Unsurprisingly, the EU’s common position focused on a fragment of the aid effectiveness agenda, specifically joint programming and a transparency guarantee to improve the disclosure of aid flows (Council of the European Union, 2011).

The context in which the Busan negotiations took place was complex: the geopolitics of development had changed, and unlike Paris and Accra, “this time it was not EU vs. USA, it was DAC members vs. non-DAC members” (Interview 36, June 2012). The USA had a more open attitude towards aid effectiveness, though its agenda was political (that is, integrating emerging powers into the existing global governance for development) rather than normative (that is, enhancing the quality of aid through specific targets and indicators) (Interview 36 and 39, June–July 2012). The group of emerging powers, for their part, was unenthusiastic about the draft outcome document as this “was based on DAC norms built in Paris and Accra where they were not present” (Interview 37, June 2012), to the point that China and India signed it only after they received assurances that the commitments therein would be voluntary (*The Guardian*, 29 November 2011; AFP, 1 December 2011). Another aspect to consider is the “artificial division of the EU imposed by the DAC” (Interview 10, July 2012), with negotiations structured around a group of Sherpas: the UK represented all like-minded countries, including the Nordics but also Australia, Canada and New Zealand; France was invited as upcoming chair of the G-20; and the EC represented the rest of the EU, particularly countries in southern and central Europe (Atwood, 2012; Lightfoot & Kim, 2017).

The impact of the EU at HLF-4 (Busan) was insignificant. None of the previous policy entrepreneurs displayed an intention to lead for varying reasons (Lightfoot & Kim, 2017). The EC proposed a minimalist agenda, which was the result of a philosophical shift: aid was seen as a tool for private sector development and the pursuit of EU interests, rather than an instrument to reduce poverty and support development goals (Interviews 8 and 9, June 2002; Interviews 11 and 12, January 2019; see also *Terraviva*, 10 September 2011; *New Europe*, 21 November 2011). The Nordic countries became more lukewarm “as they understood that the EU was ready to water down commitments on aid effectiveness to include the emerging development actors” (Interview 37, June 2012). Furthermore, the EU faced two credibility gaps (*Devex*, 15 November 2011; *Agence Europe*, 30 November

2011). The first was linked to a survey published by the DAC on the eve of the Busan meeting, which revealed that EU member state performance in implementing aid effectiveness commitments was lacklustre, and thus the EU, collectively, did not fare better than other donors (Abdel-Malek, 2015; Atwood, 2012). The second concerned the consequences of the financial crisis in Europe. As the then European Commissioner for Development Andris Piebalgs stated, in Busan he “had to answer more questions about the European debt crisis than my responsibilities as development commissioner. I received more questions about Greece than about Lesotho” (*European Report*, 6 December 2011).¹⁰ The *Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation*, which was eventually agreed upon, took a holistic and inclusive approach, encompassing references to aid and other means of development cooperation and involving a large number of players, both state and non-state (Brown, 2020). However, it did not contain specific time-bound and measurable commitments, and this was, at least in part, the price paid to draw China and India in. As a European official said, “Busan may have expanded the tent, but that brought problems, a dilution if not the end of the aid effectiveness agenda” (Interview 10, July 2012; see also Interviews 11, 12, 13 and 14, January 2019–March 2020).

4. Analysis of findings: EU impact on international development

The evidence arising from the empirical section confounds some expectations about the role of the EU in multilateral negotiations. On the one hand, it has demonstrated that there is not always a linear relationship between internal capability and external impact (cf. da Conceição-Heldt & Meunier, 2014; Rhinard & Sjöstedt, 2019; Thomas, 2012; van Schaik, 2013). Indeed, the first two sets of negotiations were characterized by low internal capability, and thus the expectation would be one of insignificant impact: this was the case at HLF-1 (Rome), but not at HLF-2 (Paris). The other two sets of negotiations were characterized by high internal capability, and therefore the expectation would be for significant impact: this was the case at HLF-3 (Accra), but not at HLF-4 (Busan). On the other hand, the empirical evidence has revealed that a favourable systemic context does not always result in significant external impact, and an unfavourable context does not always result in insignificant impact (cf. Bretherton & Vogler, 2006; Oberthür & Groen, 2018; Romanyshyn, 2015). Specifically, the context was favourable in two cases: at HLF-1 (Rome), where the impact of the EU was insignificant, and at HLF-3 (Accra), where it was significant. Conversely, the systemic context was unfavourable in two cases: at HLF-2 (Paris), the impact of the EU was significant, whereas at HLF-4 (Busan), it was insignificant.

Importantly, the empirical evidence has pointed to the importance of the quality of the message and the messenger: the purposeful behaviour of a policy entrepreneur pushing the EU’s common position forward enhances the likelihood of the EU making a difference in multilateral negotiations; furthermore, the EU’s external impact is positively correlated with the credibility and ambition of policy entrepreneurs (cf. Carbone, 2007; Kilian & Elgström, 2010; Oberthür & Groen, 2015; Parker & Karlsson, 2010; Steingass, 2020). Specifically, the EU’s external impact was at a low ebb at HLF-1 (Rome) and HLF-4 (Busan). In Rome, the EU did not make an ambitious proposal and was not yet perceived to be a credible development actor, so other actors were the driving forces

advancing the aid effectiveness agenda. In Busan, the EU was on the defensive, lacking both ambition and credibility. The lack of ambition reflected divisions between EU member states over the real added value of the aid effectiveness agenda if emerging development actors were not onboard, as well as a failure of the EC to set and defend an ambitious collective position as it had done in previous cases. The lack of credibility was a consequence of the EU's poor implementation record of its previous grandiose commitments, and the economic crisis, which was perceived as a hindrance to its ability to deliver in the future. Conversely, the EU's external impact was at its peak at HLF-2 (Paris) and HLF-3 (Accra). In Paris, the EC and the Nordics joined efforts, and they were seen as both ambitious and credible: the former, due to the leadership shown in the context of the 2002 Monterrey conference and its follow-up; the latter, due to its historical record as a generous and high-performing group of donors. In Accra, the EC and the EU Presidency built on the positive achievements at HLF-2 (Paris) and the subsequent additional commitments taken at EU level, and managed to upgrade an unambitious draft circulated before the concluding meeting into a very bold final declaration (Table 1).

More specifically to EU development policy, the empirical evidence has substantiated the fact that the EU is a distinct actor and can articulate a collective position in multilateral negotiations. EU member states tend to be averse to integration or even coordination for various reasons, including different development traditions and competing identities. The EC has, however, consistently attempted to coordinate and, since the early 2000s, federate the development policies of EU member states around a common vision, which culminated in the adoption of the European Consensus on Development in December 2005 (Bergmann, Delputte, Keijzer, & Verschaeve, 2019; Bodenstein et al., 2017; Carbone, 2007; Delputte and Orbie 2020). The pursuit of the aid effectiveness agenda exemplifies these aspirations. In fact, the EU managed to act as one, largely because two alternative rationales co-existed instead of colliding (cf. Saltnes, 2019): one was normative, linked to the positive effects of enhanced aid effectiveness on the achievement of development goals, and promoted primarily by the Nordic countries and, in part, Germany; the other was political, related to the EU's aspiration (and for some, obsession) about gaining greater prominence in international development, promoted primarily by the EC, France, and some states in southern Europe. This equilibrium was altered in the early 2010s when various EU actors (starting with the EC) opted to pursue different agendas and pull in different directions. This change is reflected in the tone of the revised European Consensus on Development signed in June 2017: the EU reiterated its determination to act united, yet the language used was more that of "unity in diversity", with stronger emphasis placed on "respective comparative advantage" (Bergmann et al., 2019; Keijzer & Verschaeve, 2018). Paradoxically, EU-

Table 1. The EU in aid effectiveness negotiations, 2003 to 2011.

	HLF-1 (Rome)	HLF-2 (Paris)	HLF-3 (Accra)	HLF-4 (Busan)
Internal capability	Low (-)	Low (-)	High (+)	High (+)
Systemic context	Favourable (+)	Unfavourable (-)	Favourable (+)	Unfavourable (-)
External impact	Insignificant (-)	Significant (+)	Significant (+)	Insignificant (-)
Policy entrepreneurship	Weak (-)	Strong (+)	Strong (+)	Weak (-)

Note: "+" and "-" are used to make comparisons easier.

led coordination initiatives, including the establishment of trust funds set up in the area of migration, or the use of blending and guarantees to support the private sector as an engine for economic growth and development, have been somewhat detrimental to the aid effectiveness agenda (Holden, 2020; Orbie, 2020).

Another important finding emerging from the four cases is that the EU can, and in fact did, make a difference in (some) multilateral development negotiations. Most scholars tend to emphasize the constraints arising from the issue of parallel competence and EU member states' lack of willingness to coordinate even when collective action is desirable, which have weakened the potential influence of the EU in multilateral settings (cf. Carbone, 2017; Farrell, 2008; Keijzer & Verschaeve, 2018; Orbie et al., 2017). The issue of aid effectiveness – similar to what happened with the issue of financing for development (Carbone, 2007) and, in part, with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Orbie, 2020) – clearly demonstrates that the EU had a significant impact in at least two of the most important multilateral negotiations in international development since the turn of the century, much more than is acknowledged by development analysts (cf. Abdel-Malek, 2015; Atwood, 2012; Brown, 2020): this was the case of the negotiations that resulted in the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the 2008 Accra Agenda for Action. In doing so, rather than being in the shadow of international organizations (Orbie et al., 2017), the EU challenged the lead of the DAC, and the EC that of the DAC Secretariat, which is generally treated as the driving force on aid effectiveness (Keijzer & Verschaeve, 2018; Verschaeve & Orbie, 2018). Interestingly, some officials from the DAC Secretariat argued that the EU, acting collectively, simplified their work in brokering agreements with non-EU donors (Interviews 27 and 28, April 2009, Interviews 36 and 37, June 2012; see also Manning, 2008). Other policy makers from the EU noted that “there were constructive tensions between the two” and that the “the actions of the EU threatened the legitimacy, and even the survival, of the DAC” (Interviews 8 and 9, June 2012; Interviews 11 and 12, January 2019). The EU was less impactful in Busan, however, which cast doubts on the importance of the EU in the increasingly complex global development architecture (Lightfoot & Kim, 2017), or to conclude that “the EU is more effective when it seeks to project a technocratic approach to aid, like in Paris and Accra, and less so when it has to act as a political actor, for instance in Busan” (Interview 41, March 2020).

The launch of the *Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation* (GPEDC) at HLF-4 (Busan) was meant to mark a transformation of the “old” aid effectiveness agenda, constructed by DAC donors, into a “new” and more inclusive era of development effectiveness, with multi-stakeholder partnerships bringing together different types of development players. The first high-level meeting (HLM) of the GPEDC in Mexico City (15–16 April 2014), however, failed to fulfil expectations, as most of the emerging powers (notably, China and India) did not even attend and, most importantly, no concrete actions or new commitments, besides some voluntary initiatives, were agreed upon. The second HLM held in Nairobi (28 November–1 December 2016) was more promising, not least because it was meant to underpin the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, but it did not go beyond a stocktaking exercise of the limited progress made (Brown, 2020; Chaturvedi et al., 2021). The European Union did adopt common positions on both occasions (Council of the European Union, 2014; Council of the European Union, 2016), but it simply reiterated previous commitments – though its language was very rhetorical “on the centrality of the development effectiveness agenda in the EU’s

external action” (Interview 14, March 2020). Unsurprisingly, by the end of the 2010s, the political interest in aid effectiveness lost traction not just at EU level, but also at the level of EU member states (Interviews 23, 24, 25, 26 and 42, January-March 2020). Several studies, including one published by the EC itself, showed that despite reiterated commitments to the aid/development effectiveness principles, the track record of the EU (and its member states) significantly deteriorated (Lundsgaarde & Engberg-Pedersen, 2019).

5. Conclusion

This article has presented an analytical framework to better understand the role and effect of the European Union in multilateral negotiations. First, it has used the notion of *external impact*, adding *problem solving* to an existing analysis by scholars of EU actor-ness and effectiveness on *goal achievement*. Second, it has shown that a high degree of *internal capability* may, but also may not, result in significant impact and, in some cases, may even be detrimental to the EU’s ability to make a difference in multilateral negotiations. Third, it has demonstrated that a favourable *systemic context* may, but also may not, result in significant external impact. Fourth, and most importantly, it has revealed that the presence of an *ambitious but credible policy entrepreneur* who pushes the EU’s common position forward (be it the EC acting alone or together with one or more EU member states, including the Presidency) provides a plausible explanation for the EU’s external impact. All of this means that structural elements are not the best predictors of external impact: it is necessary to consider agency. Furthermore, it has been posited that the analytical framework is not deterministic in nature, but probabilistic at best, which means that the presence of certain factors increases the likelihood of a certain outcome.

This article, crucially, has exposed two illusions. On the one hand, in the early 2000s, donors committed to substantially improving the quality of aid, thus complementing their pledges to boost aid quantities. By the end of the 2010s, the agenda on aid effectiveness was replaced by a new narrative: foreign aid became one of the many tools to promote development, and not the most important one; it also served to tackle new global challenges, notably climate change and migration, and was used to pursue donor interests more than ever before, namely for private sector development and increased investment opportunities. On the other hand, in the early 2000s, the European Union wanted to promote aid effectiveness but perhaps more importantly was determined to establish itself as an influential actor in international development. The first decade of the new century, however, was an exception and the EU may have passed its peak as a significant global actor in development discourses and decisions. The EU’s external impact has been constrained by an increasingly complicated global architecture for development; therefore, its agenda on international development has been more inward-looking, with stronger emphasis on enhancing EU coordination for greater EU returns. The outbreak of Covid-19 provided new opportunities to relaunch the EU’s aspirations: the creation of “Team Europe”, aimed at combining and coordinating the financial efforts of supranational institutions and member states, opened a new window for the EU to reposition itself as a leading force in international development and ensure adequate support to developing countries in addressing the consequences

of the pandemic. That illusion, once again, did not last long, as the EU behaved like a reluctant payer more than a player in the changing geopolitics of development.

Notes

1. To preserve anonymity, interviews are categorized as follows: Interviews 1–14 are with officials of the European Commission and the European External Action Service, so the expression “EU official” is used; Interviews 15–26 are with policy-makers of EU member states (Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden and the Netherlands), so the expression “European official” is used; Interviews 27–42 are with other policy makers, specifically from the Development Assistance Committee, the World Bank, non-EU countries (Japan, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States of America) and civil society organizations (ActionAid, BOND, Concord, and Reality of Aid). Of these, Interviews 11–14, 23–26 and 41–42 were conducted between January 2019 and March 2020, whereas the rest were conducted in April–June 2009 and June–September 2012.
2. Specifically, the commitment was to
 - to take concrete steps on coordination of policies and harmonization procedures before 2004, both at EC and Member States level, in line with internationally agreed best practices including by implementing recommendations from the OECD Development Assistance Committee Task Force on donor practices. (Council of the European Union, 2002)
3. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that the World Bank was not very active in subsequent HLFs.
4. The proposals of the EC a part of the follow-up report of the FfD conference included some recommendations on how to best coordinate among EU donors but, as admitted by a EU official, “it was not very ambitious on aid effectiveness, as it the agenda of the EC was still quite basic: accelerate disbursement of aid, possibly through enhanced budget support” (Interview 1, April 2009).
5. An important role in coordinating the positions of countries in Southern Europe was played by the EC, as explained by an EU official: “We had major fights with the Nordics between April and November 2004. One day I blocked the door in one of the rooms of the Council building and talked to the representatives from Italy, Spain, Portugal, and France on the importance of acting as one on foreign aid. In a way, we invented the concept of South+” (Interview 3, April 2009).
6. It should be added that, as noted by an EU official, the EU was “supported by the few representatives from the developing world present in Paris, particularly Nicaragua which represented the G-77, and actually, we played them against the USA” (Interview 3, April 2009).
7. In fact, as put by a European official, “the EC stepped in and took advantage of a rather weak EU Presidency to take the lead in the last week of the negotiations” (Interview 27, April 2009).
8. Perhaps overstating the case, an EU official claimed that “the concept of Nordic+, at least on aid effectiveness, died in Paris. Before they were the good donors, the example to follow. After Paris, there was the EU” (Interview 28, April 2009).
9. A similar view of the EU’s contribution to HLF-3 (Accra) is held by European NGOs, which in a joint press release stated that last minute interventions from the EU managed to “turn a potentially disastrous outcome into an agreement that if carried through could see improvements in the way aid is delivered” (*Concord*, 4 September 2008).
10. The EU’s contribution to HLF-4 (Busan) was criticized by European NGOs, which accused the EU of “behaving like an observer” or even a “ghost”, and being “sidelined” by other important players (*Devex*, 15 November 2011; *Agence Europe*, 30 November 2011).

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Notes on contributor

Maurizio Carbone is a Professor of International Relations and Development and Jean Monnet Professor of EU External Policies at the University of Glasgow. He has published on the EU's relations with the developing world, particularly foreign aid and other development-related policies, and more generally on the politics of international development.

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