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Does the EU listen to its global partners?

Can the European Union promote its vision of the importance of regional integration around the world, while still making use of its partners' local knowledge? **Ileana Daniela Serban** delves into what the implementation of EU international aid programmes tells us about the EU as an international actor

A new EU global approach

Sources of power in the international system are diversifying. In this context, the European Union must work hard to maintain its relevance. To reinforce its global image, the EU presents itself as a

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relevance. To reinforce its global image, the EU presents itself as a successful regional integration story. The consequence has been that EU institutions have striven to promote region-to-region dialogues with other regional organisations.

Collaborating at regional rather than national level has been one means of consolidating the EU. Doing so supports regional integration in other parts of the world.

Yet, the EU has used this approach alongside other policy solutions such as delegated cooperation. This gives the EU flexibility to delegate the implementation of international aid budgets to a plethora of actors, including beneficiary countries.

The EU delegates the implementation of its international aid budgets to many different actors, including beneficiary countries

Interregionalism allows the EU to promote its particular ways of understanding policy and governance. Delegated cooperation, meanwhile, allows third-party actors to condition the way the EU implements its aid programmes.

Thus, examining contexts in which the EU has used both approaches can help us better understand the dynamic nature of EU external actorness.

The EU's evolving nature in external policies

To explore this nexus, it is helpful to analyse the implementation of EU international aid budgets. Such analysis can show us what the EU is truly aiming to achieve through its external policies. It also allows us to go beyond an understanding based solely on how the EU's partners around the world regard it.

How other actors perceive the EU is still highly important. However, looking at how words match deeds can help reveal the ways the EU behaves as a global actor.

With this in mind, my **recent research in *European Political Science*** looked at EU aid budget spending. When the EU collaborates with other regional organisations, does it delegate the implementation of aid programmes to EU aid beneficiaries? If it does, given the collaborative nature of delegated cooperation, this would indicate that the EU can indeed exploit local knowledge on

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development while deploying policy approaches well connected to its identity as an international actor. A good example is the EU's use of region-to-region dialogues.

Collaboration with Africa, Asia, and Latin America

My study shows that the EU implements its aid budgets using different approaches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. When EU institutions have African regional organisations as aid beneficiaries, and if they deem it appropriate to delegate the implementation of such aid, the EU tends to delegate to another donor rather than to the beneficiaries themselves. This, of course, makes it less likely that EU aid beneficiaries will achieve ownership of that aid, and it removes agency from local actors.

The study also looks at EU dialogue with Latin America. I find that region-to-region cooperation and delegating cooperation to local actors appear to reinforce each other. This confirms that, under specific conditions, the EU can indeed delegate the implementation of its aid programmes while maintaining a regional approach.

The EU can indeed delegate the implementation of its aid programmes while maintaining a regional approach

The Latin American example suggests that such conditions include the internationally recognised leadership of actors in the region in implementing South-South cooperation. Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and Mexico, for example, have all successfully implemented programmes exchanging best policy practices and development successes with peer countries in the region. Meanwhile, they have consolidated further regional integration. This makes the region a trusted partner for EU institutions when implementing EU regional programmes.

Lastly, my study shows that Asia is the only continent where the EU's use of region-to-region programmes is not connected with delegating the implementation of EU programmes. This is, arguably, the result of strong regional leadership from China, which appears to condition the EU presence. China's influence prevents the EU from using local knowledge when implementing its programmes across the different regions of Asia.

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The EU as a global actor

Analysing the spending of EU aid budgets reveals how third-party actors exert significant influence on EU external policy implementation. In areas of limited local leadership, the EU can continue supporting regional integration as a way of promoting development. Comparing the EU presence in Africa to the EU dialogue with Latin America offers further insight. If regional knowledge has already been shared successfully, this helps the EU to continue using such expertise. It also encourages the EU to delegate implementation of its programmes to local actors.

Analysing EU aid budget spending reveals how third-party actors exert significant influence on EU external policy implementation

EU presence in Asia shows that in areas of strong regional leadership, the EU is unable to benefit from local knowledge while implementing regional programmes. This means the EU cannot support regional integration as local actors' trusted partner. And it calls into question the EU's ability to implement its model of regional integration in other parts of the world.

I believe there is great value in looking more closely at how EU external policies get implemented. We must also look at how – and whether – EU programmes have the impact their policymakers intended. Closer scrutiny can improve EU policymakers' understanding of the EU on the global stage. In an era in which the EU is seen as an increasingly geopolitical actor, this is hugely important. If the EU genuinely wants to **leave its self-reflective phase behind and start listening to its partners**, this is the way to do it.

This article presents the views of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the ECPR or the Editors of *The Loop*.

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