

EU-ASEAN Cooperation for Sustainable Growth: A Policy Analysis of Economic and Developmental Impact

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Abstract

This research analysed the transformation of European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (EU-ASEAN), development cooperation into a multidimensional framework linking trade, aid, and sustainability. It situates the partnership within the global transformation of development governance from poverty reduction toward sustainability-oriented policy regimes. The research highlighted the EU's dual identity as both a normative power and a strategic actor, exploring how this duality shapes institutional design and developmental outcomes. Using official data on Official Development Assistance (ODA), trade integration, and sectoral initiatives, this research evaluated how mechanisms such as Global Europe (NDICI), Enhanced Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument (E-READI), and the ASEAN-EU Dialogue on Sustainable Development operationalize the EU's guiding principles of complementarity, coordination, and coherence. The findings show that EU assistance has generated measurable, but uneven, gains in trade facilitation, governance capacity, and social-sector resilience. Lower-income ASEAN members have benefited from infrastructure and institutional support, while middle-income countries increasingly engage through policy-based and technical cooperation. However, persistent governance asymmetries, bureaucratic rigidity, and limited local ownership continue to constrain impact. Conceptually, the research interprets EU-ASEAN cooperation as a case of pragmatic inter-regionalism, where normative ambition and economic pragmatism converge through sustainability-based policy diffusion. The partnership ultimately stands as both a laboratory and a litmus test for a new generation of equitable and sustainable inter-regional development governance.

Keywords: EU-ASEAN cooperation, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Official Development Assistance (ODA), trade integration, policy coherence

Introduction

The global architecture of development cooperation has evolved markedly since the early 2000s. The transition from post-war reconstruction to a multidimensional agenda of poverty reduction, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability, was first articulated in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and later expanded through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), redefining the scope and ambition of international development policy (Fehling et al., 2013). Central to this shift is SDG 17's call to revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development (SDG, 2024), which underscores that sustainable progress depends not only on domestic reform but on the quality and depth of cross-regional cooperation. Within this context, the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) stand out as two regional actors capable of aligning economic dynamism with long-term sustainability objectives.

The EU's dual identity - as both a bilateral donor and the supranational coordinator of member-state development policies, grants it an unusual position within the international development regime (Downes, 2017). This hybrid character enables the Union to project normative commitments rooted in solidarity, human rights, and social justice (Grilli, 1993; Nugent, 2000) while simultaneously advancing strategic economic and geopolitical interests. EU-ASEAN relations exemplify this intersection: trade liberalization, political dialogue, and development assistance converge within an institutionally dense partnership that intertwines normative aspirations with strategic imperatives.

The scale of the EU's engagement reinforces its global significance. In 2021, the EU and its member states accounted for roughly one-third of global ODA, approximately USD 185.9 billion, while shaping development governance more broadly through their influence in multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, and WTO (OECD, 2022a). This dual leverage positions the EU not only as a major financial actor but also as a key architect of the rules and norms governing international development.

ASEAN's economic trajectory further elevates the strategic relevance of the partnership. Rapid structural transformation has narrowed income gaps with advanced economies: while the EU's average GNI per capita reached USD 48,779 in 2021, the East Asia-Pacific region achieved USD 20,131, with annual growth rates of 4-6 percent compared to 1.8 percent in OECD countries (World Bank, 2021; OECD, 2023). Projections to 2035 indicate continued convergence, particularly for Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Te Velde, 2006; World Bank, 2021), positioning ASEAN simultaneously as an increasingly integrated regional market and as a critical testing ground for sustainability-oriented cooperation.

Against this backdrop, our paper examines EU-ASEAN cooperation as an evolving interregional development regime. It analyzes how the EU's normative and strategic agendas intersect in practice and how policy coherence and institutional design - conceptualized through Hoebink's (2004) 'four C's' of complementarity, coordination, coherence, and consistency - shape developmental outcomes. Drawing on ODA allocation patterns, trade-related instruments, and thematic programs in environmental resilience and capacity-

building, the study evaluates both the developmental consequences of EU engagement and the tensions inherent in its dual identity. The overarching question guiding the analysis is how EU-ASEAN cooperation translates into measurable sustainable-development outcomes, and what this reveals about the changing character of interregional development governance.

Conceptual and Institutional Background

The foundations of the European Union's development cooperation are anchored in the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which established development policy as an integral component of the Union's external action (Articles 177-179). The Treaty articulated three overarching objectives: the promotion of sustainable economic and social development; the integration of developing countries into the global economy; and the eradication of poverty, complemented by explicit commitments to democracy, the rule of law, and human rights (European Union, 1992; Higgins & Prowse, 2009). These objectives have since been elaborated through successive policy frameworks - the European Community Development Policy Statement (Council of the European Union, 2000), the European Consensus on Development (Council of the European Union, 2005), and the New European Consensus on Development (Council of the European Union, 2017). Each policy further institutionalizes the EU's ambition to reconcile normative aspirations with economic partnership (Santos, 2009).

Financially, EU development cooperation operates within a multi-level governance architecture that combines supranational and national resources. The European Development Fund (EDF) and its successor, NDICI (2021-2027), constitute the Union's principal budgetary instruments for external assistance. While NDICI consolidates previously fragmented funding streams under a unified framework for neighborhood, development, and international cooperation, its overall allocation of EUR 79.5 billion reflects both the scale and strategic selectivity of EU engagement (European Commission, 2021). Although the ASEAN region does not occupy the same geographic centrality as the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries, it remains a significant recipient of EU thematic programs targeting climate action, food security, health system strengthening, and civil society development (Brillinger et al., 2022).

Over the past five decades, the Union's external economic instruments have also undergone substantial transformation from non-reciprocal trade preferences, such as the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) introduced in 1971 (European Commission, 1981), to reciprocal, WTO-compatible Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) (Doidge & Holland, 2015; Mackie et al., 2005). This shift mirrors the evolution of global trade governance and the waning developmental utility of unilateral preference schemes (Keijzer, 2010). In contemporary practice, the EU-ASEAN relationship therefore represents a genuinely integrated form of inter-regional cooperation in which aid, trade, and regulatory dialogue are embedded within a single policy framework. Mechanisms such as the Enhanced Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument (E-READI), the ASEAN-EU Dialogue on Sustainable Development, and regional crisis-response initiatives (ASEAN, 2024) exemplify this synthesis, linking developmental

assistance to broader objectives of institutional resilience, policy coherence, and sustainable growth.

Methodology

The research applies a multi-method qualitative–descriptive research design that integrates documentary analysis, structured policy analysis, and longitudinal examination of ODA data to assess how EU-ASEAN cooperation generates measurable, sustainable-development outcomes. This triangulated approach is appropriate for capturing both the institutional evolution and the material implications of a complex interregional partnership.

First, the research applies qualitative document analysis of core policy texts, including EU treaties and legislative frameworks, European Commission communications and programming documents (such as the European Consensus on Development and Global Europe/NDICI), evaluation reports, ASEAN Community blueprints and ministerial declarations, and joint EU-ASEAN dialogue outputs. These documents are treated as evolving articulations of institutional intent and as discursive sites in which normative, strategic, and developmental priorities are negotiated.

Second, a structured policy-analysis framework based on Hoebink’s (2004) four principles of complementarity, coordination, coherence, and consistency serves as the analytical criteria for assessing the architecture and strategic logic of EU external action in Southeast Asia. This framework enables a systematic evaluation of the division of labor between EU institutions and member states, the integration of trade, development, and sustainability objectives, and the degree of alignment between EU interventions and ASEAN policy priorities.

Third, a descriptive quantitative analysis of ODA trends is conducted using OECD-DAC and European Commission datasets. Covering the early 1990s to 2023, the analysis examines temporal trajectories, sectoral and geographic allocations, and ASEAN’s relative position within the EU’s global aid portfolio. The empirical scope includes all ten ASEAN member states, with particular attention to sectors central to sustainable growth, including environmental resilience, sustainable infrastructure, social-sector development, governance, and trade facilitation.

Throughout, “developmental outcomes” are conceptualized not as direct causal effects but as observable shifts in resource allocation, institutional capacity, and policy design that collectively reflect the evolving developmental, normative, and strategic dynamics of EU-ASEAN cooperation. This approach links macro-level institutional change to the differentiated transformations observed across ASEAN member states.

Key Concerns in Development Cooperation

Global development cooperation operates within an increasingly complex and volatile environment shaped by overlapping crises, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and persistent structural inequalities. These crises have not only reversed years of social progress but also exposed the limits of existing institutional architectures. Both the EU and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have been forced to confront a dual challenge: safeguarding economic growth while sustaining social inclusion and environmental resilience. Within this context, EU-ASEAN cooperation represents both a strategic opportunity and a test case for translating normative commitments into effective instruments of sustainable development.

The COVID-19 pandemic starkly revealed the vulnerabilities of both regions. The Asian Development Bank (2022) estimates that 4.7 million people in ASEAN fell into extreme poverty due to pandemic-induced disruptions, while Eurostat (2024) reports that 21.7 percent of the EU population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion. In ASEAN, the crisis disproportionately affected informal workers and small enterprises. In Europe, it accentuated regional disparities and strained welfare systems. These patterns underscore the need for inclusive recovery models that integrate health, education, and labor policies within broader development frameworks. EU-ASEAN initiatives on public health cooperation, social protection, and digital transformation have thus gained renewed strategic salience, serving as platforms for rethinking the social dimensions of growth.

Parallel to the health crisis, the climate emergency continues to erode developmental gains. Rising sea levels, biodiversity loss, and extreme weather events threaten livelihoods across Southeast Asia, with estimates suggesting an 11% decline in ASEAN's GDP due to environmental shocks affecting agriculture, fisheries, and tourism (Prakash, 2018). In 2022, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand experienced devastating floods (ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance Centre, 2022). The EU faces parallel vulnerabilities, including heat waves, droughts, and forest fires across Spain, Portugal, France, Romania, and Italy (European Commission, 2022). This situation demonstrates that both regions share a mutual exposure to environmental stress. Furthermore, these convergent risks create fertile ground for interregional climate cooperation, particularly in renewable energy, disaster preparedness, and sustainable finance. However, despite numerous EU-ASEAN initiatives, such as the High-Level Dialogue on Environment and Climate Change and the E-READI platform, implementation remains fragmented, and long-term economic benefits are difficult to quantify (ASEAN, 2024).

Institutional Fragmentation and Policy Coherence

Beyond crisis management, structural challenges persist within the EU's development architecture. The dispersion of competences between EU institutions and member states has long been identified as a central obstacle to coherence and efficiency (Brillinger et al., 2022). Although the TEU introduced the principle of shared competence (European Commission,

1992), overlapping mandates have often produced duplication and diluted strategic focus. The Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) designs regional programs. However, member states continue to operate autonomous bilateral portfolios, such as Germany's and France's energy cooperation programs, that coexist with EU-funded initiatives like the ASEAN-EU Energy Cooperation (EUEI). The absence of unified monitoring frameworks weakens policy visibility and complicates impact assessment (Keijzer, 2010; Downes, 2017).

A second concern involves the coherence and alignment of EU objectives with local development priorities. While coherence constitutes one of the EU's "four C's" (Hoebink, 2004), coordination between trade, development, and environmental policy remains partial (Santos, 2009). In ASEAN, such misalignment is evident in the Aid for Trade (AfT) programs in Cambodia and Laos, which successfully improved customs administration yet delivered limited industrial upgrading or local value creation. This reflects a deeper paradox: the EU's insistence on procedural accountability often restricts the adaptive flexibility necessary for transformative development (Rüland, 2001; Brillinger et al., 2022).

Decision-making centralization further compounds these issues. Authority over program design and budgeting remains centrally managed by EU institutions, limiting local ownership and responsiveness (Keijzer, 2010). The EU-ASEAN Regional Integration Support Programme (APRIS II) illustrates this imbalance: despite substantial funding, ASEAN's participation in setting priorities and evaluating progress remained limited, constraining the program's developmental impact and institutional empowerment (European Commission, 2015). The EU's growing reliance on external consultants, a consequence of insufficient in-house expertise (Keijzer, 2010), exacerbates the disconnect between program management and learning. On the recipient side, low absorptive capacity among ASEAN administrations, particularly in Myanmar and Laos, has delayed implementation and reduced fund utilization (Rüland, 2001).

Trade Policy, Economic Integration, and Developmental Asymmetries

Trade represents the core mechanism linking EU external policy to developmental outcomes. Historically, the EU's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), established in 1971 under the WTO's enabling clause (European Commission, 1981), sought to stimulate exports and industrial diversification in developing economies (Carbone, 2008). Yet, in practice, tariff reductions for sensitive products averaged only 3.5 percentage points, providing minimal incentives for ASEAN exporters (Rüland, 2001). The 1995 and 2001 reforms simplified procedures, and the 2006 revision introduced the GSP+, EBA, and general tiers (European Commission, 2013; Carbone, 2008). The GSP+ system expanded benefits for states that complied with human-rights, labor, and governance standards. However, its conditionality embedded policy uncertainty, as preferences could be unilaterally withdrawn (Barry, 2010). This unpredictability discouraged long-term investment, contradicting one of the GSP's developmental goals.

The system's sectoral bias further disadvantages ASEAN economies. Agricultural and fisheries exports - critical for rural employment - face narrow preference margins and stringent EU regulatory barriers. This reveals a developmental hierarchy within EU trade policy, where ACP countries historically enjoyed priority access, while ASEAN states occupied the least-favored tier (Pieterse, 1998). Nevertheless, the rapid industrialization of East Asia in the 1980s and 1990s compelled a strategic shift. The EU-ASEAN Cooperation Agreement (1980) and the establishment of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), reinforced by the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) since 1996, repositioned ASEAN within the EU's broader Asia strategy (Turner, 1982).

In the 2000s, the EU's Global Europe agenda accelerated the transition from non-reciprocal preferences toward reciprocal Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), embedding environmental and social clauses (European Commission, 2021). This reorientation tied trade liberalization to sustainable growth, reframing market access as a vehicle for promoting green and inclusive development. The results have been mixed. While FTAs attracted new foreign direct investment (FDI) and enhanced efficiency (Stevens & Killick, 1989), asymmetric liberalization exposed small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to intensified competition without adequate safety nets (Boschini & Olofsgård, 2007; Doidge & Holland, 2015). The resulting structural adjustment pressures risk undermining employment and widening inequality. These paradoxes are acknowledged but rarely resolved in EU strategy documents (European Commission, 2021).

The broader geopolitical environment further complicates the developmental calculus. The deepening of EU-China relations through the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in 2007, which includes dialogue on social security and labor mobility, has introduced a triangular dynamic that indirectly influences ASEAN's policy space (Maher, 2016). In this multipolar development framework, EU-ASEAN cooperation operates within an increasingly competitive landscape where conditionality, partnership, and competition co-exist.

Health Governance and Post-Pandemic Multilateralism

The transnational nature of COVID-19 underscored the intersection between health security, economic resilience, and multilateral governance. Initially marked by fragmented national responses in Europe (Kliem, 2021), the EU ultimately emerged as a promoter of interregional solidarity, facilitating virtual ministerial dialogues, technical exchanges, and financial assistance (European Commission, 2021). The ASEAN region, among the world's most disaster-prone, had already institutionalized health cooperation through the ASEAN Health Ministers Meeting (AHMM) and the Healthy ASEAN 2020 framework, which declared that health should be at the center of development and ASEAN cooperation (Castillo-Carandang et al., 2020; Lamy & Phua, 2012). In April 2020, the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 launched the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund to support pandemic response and supply-chain continuity (Castillo-Carandang et al., 2020). ASEAN also expanded ASEAN Plus dialogues with China, Japan, and Korea, facilitating regional coordination and laying foundations for enhanced East Asian integration (Kliem, 2021).

The EU's response complements these regional efforts with a €350 million assistance package, which substantially exceeds the USD 18.3 million provided by the United States (Abate et al., 2020). While intra-EU solidarity is initially uneven (Cicchi et al., 2020), the Union's engagement demonstrated the value of development policy as a vehicle for human security, reinforcing its image as a normative power advancing health equity and multilateral cooperation.

Sustainability, Governance, and the Persistent Paradox

A fundamental question concerns whether EU interventions genuinely promote sustainable growth through the integration of economic efficiency, social inclusion, and environmental stewardship. Although sustainability is now embedded as a cross-cutting objective under the 2017 New European Consensus on Development and Global Europe (NDICI) (European Commission, 2021), practical implementation often privileges short-term procedural outputs over transformative outcomes. In EU-ASEAN cooperation, the tension is visible in renewable-energy and disaster-resilience portfolios, which closely align with the European Green Deal. However, it lacks robust metrics for employment generation, poverty alleviation, or local capacity-building (ASEAN, 2024). Consequently, the developmental value of sustainability remains under-institutionalized, dependent on project-level experimentation rather than system-wide coherence.

Taken together, these interrelated challenges reveal a profound governance paradox at the heart of EU-ASEAN development cooperation. The EU's commitment to coherence, coordination, and accountability can become a pragmatic weakness when centralization, fragmentation, and limited local adaptability reduce developmental effectiveness. Preferential trade systems such as the GSP facilitated export diversification but perpetuated dependency hierarchies; reciprocal FTAs promoted efficiency yet amplified inequality; and post-pandemic cooperation revitalized regionalism while exposing gaps in social protection. These tensions capture the defining dilemma of contemporary development policy, namely how to reconcile normative ambition with economic pragmatism.

Development Cooperation Initiatives

Historical Evolution and Strategic Transformation

The foundations of contemporary EU-ASEAN development cooperation are deeply rooted in the historical ties between Europe and Southeast Asia. Owing to their colonial legacies, most ASEAN member states had long-standing bilateral relations with various European powers even before the establishment of regional frameworks. Formal cooperation between ASEAN and the European Economic Community (EEC) began in the 1970s, culminating in the EU-ASEAN Cooperation Agreement of 1980, which institutionalized political dialogue, trade, and economic collaboration.

Since then, the relationship has undergone significant evolution. The 21st century marked a distinct upward trend in development cooperation initiatives as both regions expanded their engagement from traditional aid to sustainable growth, governance, and capacity-building. Between 2014 and 2020, ASEAN member countries received approximately €2 billion in bilateral assistance from the EU, primarily targeting sustainable infrastructure, education, and trade facilitation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU emerged as one of ASEAN's key partners in crisis management and recovery. The Union allocated €800 million to strengthen health personnel, hospital capacity, and related infrastructure, and contributed an additional €2.2 billion to the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) facility, ensuring equitable vaccine access across Southeast Asia (Syakirah, 2021).

In December 2020, the EU and ASEAN upgraded their partnership to “strategic” status (Allison-Reumann & Murray, 2021). This shift marked a fundamental redefinition of their relationship, from a donor-recipient model toward a mutual partnership of equals, based on shared principles of sustainability, regional resilience, and rule-based multilateralism. Under this new framework, the EU-ASEAN Development Cooperation Programme (2021–2027) directs resources toward key priorities, including sustainable infrastructure, environmental conservation, higher education, labor mobility, and safe migration (ASEAN, 2024). Crucially, these programs are designed to support existing ASEAN initiatives, emphasizing mutual learning, institutional strengthening, and local ownership.

Platforms for Policy Dialogue and Sustainable Development

Development cooperation between the EU and ASEAN increasingly relies on dialogue-based instruments that foster policy convergence, strategic coordination, and collective problem-solving. The ASEAN-EU dialogue on sustainable development functions as the central platform for aligning both regions' approaches with the United Nations' SDGs. Complementing this, the fourth ASEAN-EU High-Level Dialogue on Environment and Climate Change, held in October 2022, has reaffirmed the joint commitment to biodiversity preservation, climate adaptation, and the sustainable use of natural resources (ASEAN, 2024).

These interregional mechanisms have produced tangible cooperative initiatives, including joint programs on peatland restoration, haze mitigation, and biodiversity conservation, areas where ecological interdependence necessitates coordinated regional responses. Beyond environmental governance, the E-READI further consolidates the institutional framework by facilitating 'ongoing and new dialogues' across a broad spectrum of policy domains and stakeholders, including governmental, academic, and private-sector actors (ASEAN, 2024).

E-READI exemplifies an integrated, multi-stakeholder model of cooperation that links environmental, educational, and digital transformation agendas. Through this cross-sectoral approach, the EU and ASEAN seek to enhance regional resilience, policy coherence, and

mutual learning, positioning interregional dialogue not merely for a channel of aid delivery, but as a strategic instrument for sustainable and inclusive growth.

As Hwee (2023) highlights, the maturing EU-ASEAN partnership exemplifies the logic of inter-regionalism: the institutionalized interaction between regional organizations that creates new layers of governance, identity, and developmental agency. Within this framework, dialogues such as the ASEAN-EU High-Level Dialogue on Environment and Climate Change or the E-READI function not merely as platforms for consultation but as generative arenas of regional integration. They translate shared priorities, from sustainable growth to digital connectivity, into iterative processes of norm diffusion and policy experimentation. This institutionalized inter-regionalism situates ASEAN-EU cooperation at the frontier of global governance innovation, where dialogue becomes a developmental mechanism.

Financial Architecture and Quantitative Dynamics of EU ODA

The EU's development cooperation operates under shared competence between the Union and its member states. According to the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), ODA comprises grants or loans provided by the official sector on concessional financial terms to promote economic development and prosperity (OECD, 2024).

In 2021, the EU and its member states collectively disbursed €70.2 billion in net ODA, representing 9% of the total EU budget and 37.04% of global ODA (European Commission, 2023). The European Commission accounted for approximately 21% of this total. The average national contribution was USD 4.03 billion, but with a wide variation (standard deviation ± 7.35), underscoring uneven national commitments. Germany provided the largest share (USD 32.23 billion), while Slovenia contributed the smallest (USD 0.07 billion) (OECD, 2022b).

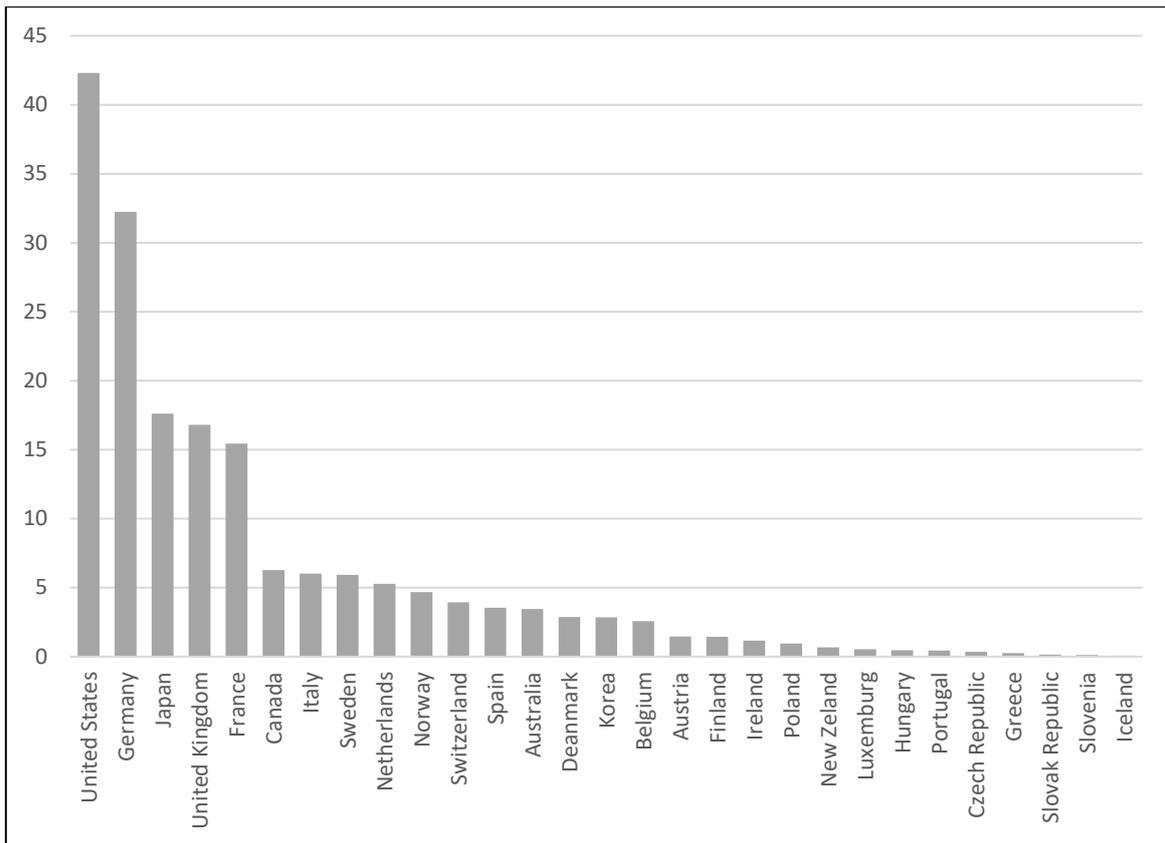


Figure 1. Global ODA in 2021 on a Grant-Equivalent Basis (in USD billion)

Source: OECD (2022)

Temporal Trends in EU Official Development Assistance (ODA)

Only a handful of EU member states have consistently achieved the United Nations ODA target of 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) - most notably Luxembourg (0.99%), Sweden (0.91%), Germany (0.76%), and Denmark (0.71%) (OECD, 2023). Despite these exceptions, the overall trajectory of European ODA reflects a steady, long-term expansion of financial resources and policy ambition, as depicted in Figure 2.

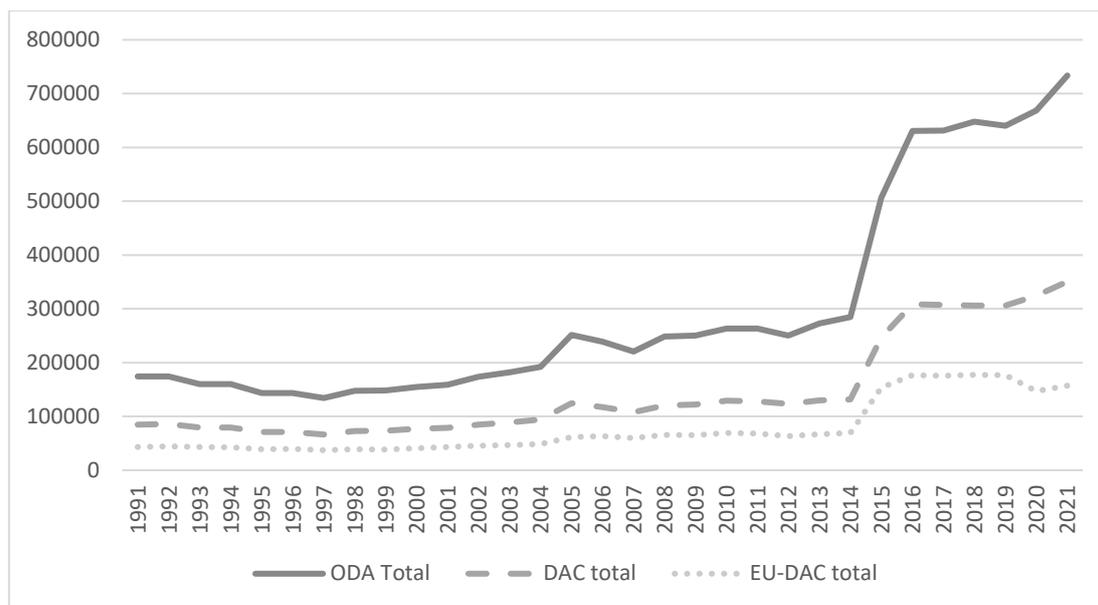


Figure 2. Net and Total ODA, DAC and EU Disbursements (in USD million)

Source: OECD (2022)

Between 1991 and 2021, EU ODA volumes grew consistently - rising by an average of 5.3 percent annually during the 1990s. This steady increase coincided with the institutionalization of development cooperation within the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties, which elevated poverty reduction and sustainable growth as shared Union priorities. This period also exposed an asymmetry. While EU-level disbursements expanded, member-state contributions slightly declined, reflecting a gradual centralization of aid management within EU institutions.

After 2004, following the Union's enlargement and the introduction of new neighborhood and development frameworks, total official development support increased sharply. The global financial crisis (2008-2010) temporarily disrupted this trajectory, as fiscal consolidation in many member states constrained aid budgets.

However, by 2014, amid recovery from the Eurozone crisis and the adoption of the SDGs, ODA flows surged once again, signaling renewed political commitment to eradicating global poverty and promoting sustainable growth. A short phase of stagnation between 2017 and 2020 reflected both donor fatigue and budgetary re-prioritization, before the Brexit adjustment led to a temporary decline in aggregate EU ODA, as the United Kingdom's contributions (previously among the largest donors) were excluded from EU totals. By 2021, however, overall ODA levels had largely recovered to pre-Brexit averages, demonstrating the resilience of the EU's collective donor capacity.

This long-term trajectory also emerges clearly in the weighted GNI-to-ODA ratio, which highlights three pivotal inflection points in EU aid policy evolution. First, in 2002, in response to the MDG framework, the European Commission and Council jointly called on member states to increase their contributions, achieving a combined ODA/GNI ratio of 0.32%

(Hoebink, 2004). Second, in 2005, the Union adopted the EU Roadmap for Scaling Up Aid, a formal timetable to reach the United Nations 0.7 percent target by 2015, with an intermediate collective goal of 0.56 percent by 2010, thereby linking normative commitments to measurable fiscal benchmarks. Third, in 2014 - Post-Euro Crisis and SDG Alignment, the recovery from the Eurozone crisis and the transition from the MDGs to the SDGs catalyzed a new surge in aid spending, reflecting a broader reorientation of EU development cooperation toward sustainability, governance, and resilience.

Overall, these turning points illustrate how global development agendas and European macroeconomic cycles have jointly shaped the rhythm of EU aid expansion. The evolution of ODA since the early 1990s reflects not merely financial growth but the gradual consolidation of the EU's dual identity, as both a normative power committed to global solidarity and a strategic actor navigating fiscal and geopolitical constraints.

Sectoral, Bilateral, and Geographic Distribution of EU-ODA

A closer look at the sectoral composition of EU-ODA between 2009 and 2020 reveals the evolving architecture of European development priorities. As shown in Figure 3, the public sector remained the dominant beneficiary, accounting for an average of 55 percent of total disbursements. This long-term stability reflects the EU's continued reliance on governmental institutions as principal intermediaries of aid delivery, ensuring administrative oversight and policy continuity across partner states.

The second-largest allocation, averaging 20 percent, went to multilateral organizations. Significantly, this category doubled in size during the Euro-crisis years (2014-2015), when the EU sought to mitigate financial and humanitarian spillovers through joint financing with international institutions such as the World Bank and UN agencies. Support for the civil-society sector has hovered consistently around 10 percent, highlighting the EU's normative commitment to participatory governance and accountability mechanisms.

A distinct diversification emerged after 2011, when universities and research institutions entered the aid portfolio, accounting for a steady 1 percent share. This signaled the growing recognition of knowledge transfer and innovation networks as instruments of sustainable development. From 2015 onward, private-sector engagement appeared in the portfolio with variable intensity (7-10 percent), marking a shift toward inclusive, multi-actor models of cooperation that integrate entrepreneurship, social enterprise, and green-investment initiatives. Finally, the 2015 institutional reforms eliminated non-sectoral subsidies, resulting in a more targeted and thematically coherent allocation of resources.

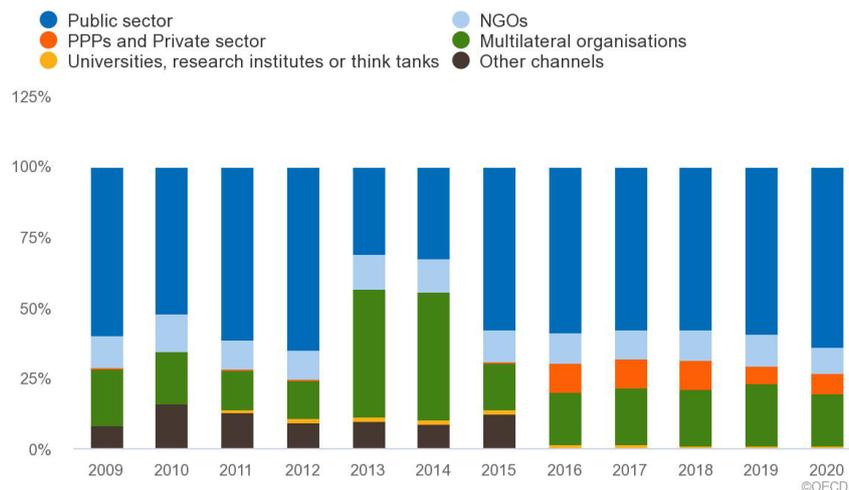


Figure 3. Sectoral Breakdown of EU ODA (2009–2020, % Gross Disbursements)

Source: OECD (2022)

The bilateral distribution of ODA in Figure 4 further illustrates the EU’s operational logic. In 2020, roughly 59% of total bilateral funds targeted specific national programs, reaffirming the predominance of country-tailored cooperation frameworks. Humanitarian and food-aid allocations accounted for 11.3%, while the residual category, comprising cross-cutting and pilot initiatives, represented 27.1% of total disbursements. The latter highlights the fragmentation of smaller thematic and short-term projects that continue to challenge coherence within the EU aid system.

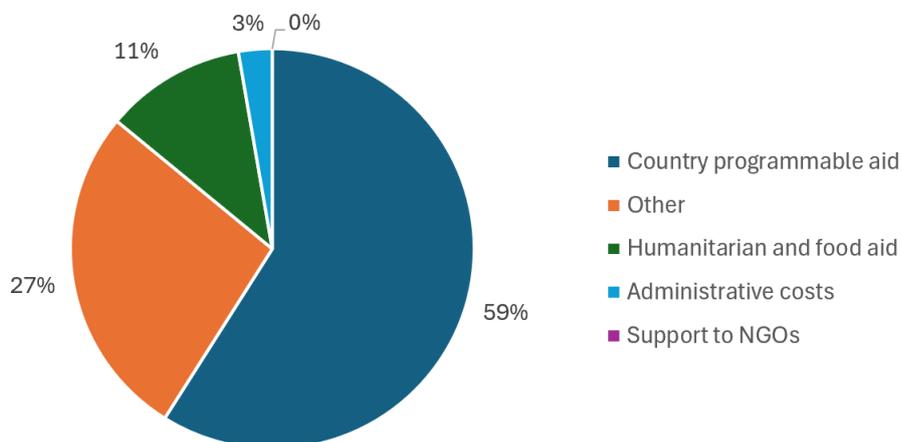


Figure 4. Distribution of Bilateral EU ODA by type of expenditure 2020

Source: OECD (2022)

From a geographical perspective, Africa and the Middle East remain the central foci of EU development assistance, reflecting both historical ties and the Union’s strategic interest in regional stability, migration management, and resource governance. This concentration is visible in Figure 5, which shows that these two regions jointly account for the majority of EU disbursements.

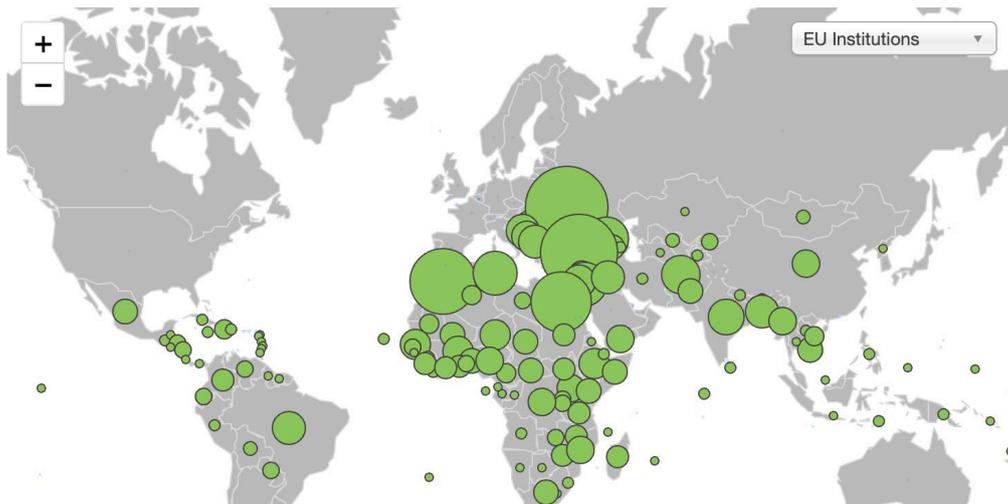


Figure 5. Geographical Distribution of EU ODA 2020

Source: OECD (2022)

Although ASEAN’s share of global EU ODA remains modest, its trajectory exhibits gradual but yet consistent growth, particularly in the context of the Union’s shift toward thematic and regional cooperation instruments.

Table 1. EU ODA to ASEAN Countries (2019–2020, USD million)

Country	2019	2020
Brunei Darussalam	0	0
Cambodia	68	140
Indonesia	16	21
Lao PDR	50	34
Malaysia	3	1
Myanmar	124	179
Philippines	38	27
Singapore	0	0
Thailand	10	12
Viet Nam	39	90

Source: OECD (2022)

Between 2019 and 2020, total EU assistance to ASEAN countries rose markedly, with the average national allocation increasing from USD 34.8 million to USD 50.4 million. Nevertheless, intra-regional disparities remain substantial. Myanmar and Cambodia emerged as the primary beneficiaries, followed by Viet Nam, Lao PDR, and the Philippines. At the same time, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, and Malaysia were classified as upper-middle-income or high-income economies that received minimal or no support. The standard deviation of ± 63.95 reflects the region’s structural heterogeneity in development needs and absorptive capacities.

When contextualized globally, ASEAN's leading recipients approached the scale of Nigeria (USD 172 million) and Uganda (USD 172 million), but remained far below major EU-supported states such as Ukraine (USD 1.66 billion), Turkey (USD 1.45 billion), and Morocco (USD 1.08 billion). These comparative figures underline ASEAN's intermediate status within the EU's global aid geography, neither a core beneficiary region like Sub-Saharan Africa nor a marginal actor, but an increasingly significant partner as cooperation shifts toward regional connectivity, environmental resilience, and sustainable growth.

Overall, the sectoral diversification, bilateral targeting, and geographic re-balancing of EU ODA reveal a long-term trend toward institutional rationalization and strategic selectivity. While public-sector dominance ensures administrative coherence, the gradual inclusion of civil society, academia, and private actors points to a more pluralistic and innovation-driven model of European development engagement - one that better aligns with ASEAN's own regional priorities and its pursuit of inclusive, sustainable development pathways.

Institutional Complexity and Policy Frameworks

The EU's development policy architecture has evolved through successive institutional and legal milestones. Early aid efforts, including the 1963 Yaoundé Convention and the 1975 Lomé Convention, primarily targeted African and Caribbean states (Hansard, 1988). The 1992 Treaty on European Union formalized development cooperation under Articles 177-179. The treaty identified three objectives: (a) promotion of sustainable economic and social development; (b) integration of developing countries into the global economy; and (c) poverty eradication, alongside support for democracy, rule of law, and human rights (European Union, 1992; Higgins & Prowse, 2009).

The EU performs a dual role as a bilateral donor and a supranational coordinator. The Downes (2017) characterizes the role as a distinctive 'dual donor system' that operationalizes through Hoebink's (2004) four guiding principles of complementarity, coordination, coherence, and consistency. These form the 'institutional grammar' of EU-ASEAN cooperation. Complementarity and coordination manifest in shared funding mechanisms linking national programs with EU-level instruments such as Global Europe (NDICI). At the same time, coherence and consistency expose the Union's internal challenge of aligning normative aspirations with economic interests in Southeast Asia's liberalized markets.

The 2000 European Community Development Policy Declaration (Council of the European Union, 2000) operationalized these principles by identifying six priority areas (macroeconomic policy, food security, transport, trade and development, regional cooperation, and institutional capacity-building) and four cross-cutting issues (human rights, gender equality, environmental protection, and conflict prevention). The 2005 European Consensus on Development (Council of the European Union, 2005) further consolidated the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability. The 2017 New European Consensus reoriented EU policy around a 'geopolitical' vision linking development to migration, governance, and peacebuilding, and established Global Europe (NDICI) with a €79.5 billion allocation for 2021-2027.

Within this architecture, ASEAN primarily benefits through thematic programs focused on food security, health, environmental protection, and civil society support, rather than through geographically earmarked instruments (European Commission, 2021). The region also remains a major recipient of ECHO humanitarian aid due to its high exposure to natural disasters.

Structural Challenges and Path Dependence

Despite many advancements, persistent institutional challenges continue to limit the developmental impact of EU assistance. Fragmentation, centralization, and rigid accountability mechanisms have constrained the adaptability of aid programs (Brillinger et al., 2022; Keijzer, 2010). For example, Aid for Trade initiatives in Cambodia and Laos, while procedurally robust, fail to stimulate industrial diversification, illustrating the dominance of administrative compliance over developmental learning (Rüland, 2001). Similarly, the EU-ASEAN Regional Integration Support Programme (APRIS II) remains heavily Brussels-driven, limiting ASEAN's agency in project evaluation (European Commission, 2015).

Human resource shortages within EU institutions exacerbate these inefficiencies. The expansion of aid portfolios has outpaced staff growth, increasing dependence on external consultants and eroding institutional memory (Keijzer, 2010). On the recipient side, weak absorptive capacity, particularly in Myanmar and Laos, has delayed the utilization of fund and reduced effectiveness (Rüland, 2001).

To overcome these limitations, the EU has initiated reforms to delegate project management to field delegations, improve evaluation systems, and harmonize aid programs (Zito et al., 2019). However, the structural inertia and path dependence of the ODA system continue to pose challenges for achieving genuine coherence and context-sensitive cooperation.

Toward a Coherent and Sustainable Partnership

The change of EU-ASEAN development cooperation reveals a steady institutional consolidation alongside persistent governance tensions. The European Union's ODA system, composed of EU budget allocations and voluntary member-state contributions, has gradually expanded from its early, geographically limited conventions to a multidimensional framework integrating bilateral, multilateral, and thematic instruments. The transformation culminated in the establishment of the Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI - Global Europe), which unifies previously fragmented mechanisms under a €79.5 billion envelope for 2021–2027. Within this structure, ASEAN increasingly occupies a defined, though still secondary, position, benefiting from programs that target sustainable infrastructure, environmental protection, higher education, and governance reform.

The evolving framework also reflects what Gilson (2020) describes as pragmatic inter-regionalism, a pattern of cooperation in which mutual economic interests and institutional

learning increasingly outweigh purely normative ambitions. In the EU-ASEAN context, development assistance and policy dialogue are not only instruments of solidarity but also mechanisms for building connectivity, regulatory alignment, and trade facilitation. This pragmatic turn does not negate the Union's normative identity. Rather, it operationalizes through measurable developmental outcomes such as infrastructure resilience, digital inclusion, and capacity building. By embedding sustainability into sectoral cooperation, EU-ASEAN inter-regionalism exemplifies how pragmatic governance can advance long-term sustainable growth.

Despite the institutional progress, the developmental and economic impact of EU-ASEAN cooperation remains uneven. ODA has supported tangible advances in trade facilitation, institutional capacity, and disaster management, yet its contribution to long-term economic transformation differs sharply across member states. Lower-income ASEAN countries such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar remain significant aid recipients, while more advanced economies such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia engage primarily through policy dialogues and technical cooperation rather than direct financial flows. This disparity reflects both the EU's differentiated approach to partner classification and its emphasis on normative alignment and governance reform over macroeconomic stimulus.

At the same time, the Union's commitment to coherence, coordination, and accountability, its traditional strengths, continues to generate administrative rigidity and limited responsiveness to local contexts. Centralized decision-making in the EU often constrains the adaptive potential of EU Delegations, while complex evaluation procedures may privilege procedural compliance over developmental learning. Ongoing institutional reforms, including the delegation of project management to field offices, greater use of joint programming, and improved evaluation frameworks, aim to mitigate these limitations and strengthen local ownership.

Overall, the EU-ASEAN partnership today stands at an intermediate stage between normative ambition and developmental pragmatism. It demonstrates the Union's capacity to act as a coordinated global donor, yet also exposes the constraints of its bureaucratic model in achieving context-sensitive outcomes. The challenge moving forward lies in deepening the link between policy coherence and developmental impact, ensuring that the EU's evolving ODA system not only aligns with ASEAN's priorities but also delivers measurable, sustainable benefits across a heterogeneous region.

Findings on the Evolution and Effectiveness of EU–ASEAN

Development Cooperation

The analysis reveals a coherent yet uneven trajectory in the evolution of EU-ASEAN development cooperation. Across the financial, institutional, and sectoral domains, four core findings emerge that collectively illuminate both the partnership's achievements and its structural limitations.

First, EU engagement in Southeast Asia has become more multidimensional, strategically integrated, and explicitly sustainability-oriented. The steady rise and thematic diversification of ODA, particularly in environmental governance, climate adaptation, digital transformation, and institutional capacity, indicate a shift from project-based assistance to policy-oriented cooperation. The proliferation of structured dialogues, including E-READI and climate-focused working groups, has embedded cooperation within a more institutionalized framework, enabling more regularized regulatory coordination and cross-sectoral knowledge exchange.

Second, these advances are constrained by persistent institutional fragmentation within the EU's development architecture. Overlapping competences among the European Commission, the European External Action Service, and member-state development agencies continue to dilute strategic coherence and complicate implementation. The growing reliance on external consultants provides short-term technical capacity. However, it undermines institutional continuity, erodes long-term learning, and weakens the EU's ability to cultivate sustained partnerships, challenges consistently identified across case studies and policy evaluations.

Third, the developmental returns of Aid for Trade and related economic cooperation programs remain limited. Although administrative and regulatory capacities have improved, particularly in customs, standards-setting, and public-sector administration, these initiatives have not generated substantial industrial upgrading or deeper integration into regional value chains. A key factor is the EU's highly procedural monitoring and evaluation system, which prioritises compliance and risk avoidance over adaptive governance and context-sensitive innovation. This rigidity constrains local experimentation and reduces incentives for more transformative reforms.

Fourth, ODA distribution across ASEAN remains markedly uneven, reflecting both the region's economic heterogeneity and the EU's income-based allocation criteria. Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam absorb the majority of financial assistance, while upper-middle-income member states engage primarily through regulatory cooperation and technical dialogue. This stratified pattern produces differentiated developmental trajectories and complicates attempts to cultivate a coherent, region-wide strategy for sustainable and inclusive growth.

Overall, these findings portray a partnership that has broadened, deepened, and become more sustainability-driven, yet remains hampered by structural asymmetries and uneven developmental impact. EU-ASEAN cooperation today represents a pragmatic form of interregionalism - capable of generating meaningful policy convergence and institutional learning - while simultaneously revealing the constraints of the EU's fragmented governance architecture and ASEAN's internal diversity. To enhance the developmental effectiveness of the partnership, both sides will require more coherent institutional alignment, adaptive implementation frameworks, and differentiated, context-responsive strategies tailored to ASEAN's diverse political economies.

Conclusion

The evolution of EU-ASEAN development cooperation demonstrates how a historically asymmetric, aid-based relationship has progressively developed into a multidimensional partnership anchored in sustainable development, regulatory convergence, and pragmatic interregionalism. From the fragmented arrangements of the Yaoundé and Lomé Conventions to the more coherent architecture established through the 2017 New European Consensus on Development and the NDICI-Global Europe instrument, the EU's engagement with Southeast Asia has shifted from peripheral development assistance to a strategically significant element of its external action. This long-term transformation underscores how institutional reforms, path dependencies, and geopolitical shifts have shaped a partnership that continually negotiates the tension between normative ambition and the constraints of practical governance.

Empirically, the findings show that EU development cooperation has generated tangible, though uneven, economic and institutional outcomes across ASEAN. Rising and increasingly thematic ODA flows have strengthened governance capacity, public-sector resilience, environmental management, and human capital development, particularly in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, where aid-financed programs have supported public administration, education, and sustainable infrastructure. In more advanced ASEAN economies such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, cooperation has moved decisively toward technical and regulatory partnerships that promote institutional convergence, innovation-driven growth, and alignment with emerging global standards. Although these initiatives have contributed to improvements in logistics performance, trade facilitation, and administrative efficiency, the breadth and depth of their impact remain conditioned by persistent disparities in administrative capacity, policy coherence, and socio-economic structure within the region.

Conceptually, the partnership articulates a holistic model of sustainable growth that integrates economic modernization, social inclusion, and environmental stewardship. Economic sustainability is supported through regional market integration, connectivity, and private-sector engagement; social sustainability through programs advancing human rights, gender equality, and inclusive governance; and environmental sustainability through cooperation on climate adaptation, biodiversity governance, and renewable-energy transitions. Together, these policy domains operationalize the EU's understanding of sustainability as both a developmental outcome and a guiding governance principle. However, sustainability is more fully institutionalized as a strategic narrative than realized as a measurable developmental outcome, constrained by EU proceduralism, fragmented governance structures, and ASEAN's uneven institutional capacities.

These findings carry several policy implications. For the European Union, enhancing institutional coherence remains central to effective engagement. Fragmentation across the Commission, the EEAS, and member-state development agencies continues to dilute strategic focus and complicate implementation. A more unified architecture, anchored in joint programming, clearer divisions of labor, and streamlined intra-EU coordination, would

strengthen consistency and credibility. Reducing reliance on external consultants while deepening in-house expertise within Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) and EU Delegations would help rebuild institutional memory and enable more adaptive, contextually grounded programming. Reorienting monitoring and evaluation systems toward iterative, problem-driven learning rather than procedural compliance would enhance the impact of Aid for Trade and sustainability initiatives. As ASEAN increasingly prioritizes knowledge cooperation over traditional aid, the EU is also well-positioned to deepen regulatory and technological partnerships in climate governance, carbon markets, digital regulation, renewable energy, biodiversity protection, and sustainable supply chains.

For ASEAN member states, strengthening institutional and absorptive capacity is essential for translating EU cooperation into durable developmental outcomes. Investments in regulatory coherence, inter-ministerial coordination, and evidence-based policymaking would improve the uptake and effectiveness of EU support. Member states can also leverage EU partnerships more strategically to support industrial upgrading, compliance with evolving sustainability standards, and integration into higher-value regional and global supply chains. Enhanced ASEAN-level coordination, particularly in sustainability governance, disaster resilience, and digital regulation, would enable a more cohesive regional position and maximize the collective benefits of EU engagement. Ensuring co-ownership in agenda setting, program design, and evaluation remains critical to avoid externally driven policy transfer and to foster long-term institutional learning.

This research makes three contributions to the scholarly literature on development cooperation and interregional governance. First, it reconceptualizes EU-ASEAN relations as a pragmatic, sustainability-oriented form of interregionalism that transcends donor-recipient logics and integrates development, trade, and regulatory policy. Second, it offers a comprehensive empirical synthesis of EU engagement in Southeast Asia, demonstrating how developmental outcomes emerge not from isolated interventions but from the cumulative interaction of financial flows, institutional architectures, and governance practices. Third, this research applies Hoebink's four-principle framework (complementarity, coordination, coherence, and consistency) by integrating qualitative document analysis with descriptive ODA trend analysis to examine the dynamics of EU-ASEAN development cooperation.

Ultimately, EU-ASEAN cooperation functions as both a laboratory and a litmus test for the future of interregional development governance. It demonstrates how two regional organizations with distinct histories, institutional capacities, and political cultures can cultivate shared agendas for resilience, equity, and sustainability. The central challenge lies in transforming the partnership from a system of coordinated aid delivery into a reciprocal framework of co-development, where sustainable growth becomes not merely a declaratory norm but a measurable, mutually reinforcing outcome. If the EU and ASEAN succeed in aligning their financial, institutional, and normative resources toward this end, the partnership may emerge as a model for a new generation of equitable, sustainability-driven, and genuinely interregional development cooperation.

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