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► **To cite this version:**

Yoann G Santin, Thierry Doan, Laure Journet, E. Cascales. Cell width dictates Type VI secretion tail length. *Current Biology - CB*, 2019, 10.1016/j.cub.2019.08.058 . hal-02341393

HAL Id: hal-02341393

<https://amu.hal.science/hal-02341393v1>

Submitted on 31 Oct 2019

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Cell width dictates Type VI secretion tail length

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Running title: T6SS sheath length control

Keywords : Protein transport, protein secretion, contractile injection systems, tail sheath, length regulation, TagA, cell width, molecular ruler, membrane.

16 SUMMARY

17 The type VI secretion system (T6SS) is a multiprotein apparatus that injects protein
18 effectors into target cells, hence playing a critical role in pathogenesis and in microbial
19 communities [1–4]. The T6SS belongs to the broad family of contractile injection
20 systems (CIS), such as *Myoviridae* bacteriophages and R-pyocins, that use a spring-like
21 tail to propel a needle loaded with effectors [5,6]. The T6SS tail comprises an assembly
22 baseplate on which polymerizes a needle, made of stacked Hcp hexamers, tipped by the
23 VgrG-PAAR spike complex and wrapped by the contractile sheath made of TssB and
24 TssC [7–13]. The T6SS tail is anchored to the cell envelope by a membrane complex that
25 also serves as channel for the passage of the needle upon sheath contraction [14–16]. In
26 most CIS, the length of the tail sheath is invariable, and is usually ensured by a
27 dedicated protein called tape measure protein (TMP) [17–22]. Here we show that the
28 length of the T6SS tail is constant in enteroaggregative *Escherichia coli* cells, suggesting
29 that it is strictly controlled. By overproducing T6SS tail subunits we demonstrate that
30 component stoichiometry does not participate to the regulation of tail length. The
31 observation of longer T6SS tails when the apparatus is relocalized at the cell pole
32 further shows that tail length is not controlled by a TMP. Finally, we show that tail stops
33 its elongation when in contact with the opposite membrane, and thus that T6SS tail
34 length is determined by the cell width.

35

36 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

37 T6SS tail sheath length in EAEC.

38 The length of bacteriophage and other CIS tails such as that of anti-feeding prophages is
39 strictly controlled [17-23]. To determine whether this is also the case for the T6SS, we

40 measured the length of T6SS sheaths in EAEC wild-type cells producing a functional fusion
41 between the TssB tail subunit and the superfolder-Green Fluorescent Protein (TssB-sfGFP).
42 The sfGFP-coding sequence was inserted on the chromosome, upstream the *tssB* stop codon.
43 In this construct, the sfGFP sequence is in frame with the *tssB* gene, and the *tssB-sfGFP*
44 fusion is under the control of the native *tssB* expression signals. Cells were grown in *scil*
45 inducing medium (SIM), a defined synthetic medium that avoids batch-to-batch composition
46 variability and induces the expression of EAEC T6SS genes [24]. In agreement with the
47 localization of T6SS MC along the cell body with an underrepresentation at the poles [15,25],
48 we observed that T6SS sheaths assemble from one position on the cell body to the opposite
49 membrane. To avoid measurements of the length of contracted sheaths or of sheaths under
50 extension, time-lapse recordings were performed and only sheaths for which the elongation
51 has been completed (i.e., when the sheath holds >1 min with the same length) were
52 considered (Figure 1A). The distal extremity of these extended sheaths always co-localized
53 with the TagA stopper protein (Figure 1B). Quantitative measurements of these T6SS tail
54 length showed low disparities, with a length mean of $0.76 \pm 0.11 \mu\text{m}$ ($n = 150$) and a normal
55 distribution (Figure 1C). We thus concluded that the length of the T6SS sheath is not
56 randomly distributed, and hence that the arrest of T6SS sheath elongation is controlled. Based
57 on this conclusion, we hypothesize that T6SS sheath length might be determined by (i) the
58 number of available T6SS tail subunits, (ii) a tape measure protein, or (iii) the cell width.

59

60 **T6SS tail sheath length is not regulated by tube/sheath components stoichiometry**

61 Several reports have demonstrated that the length of some pilus-like structures is limited by
62 the number of available pilin subunits. For example, the T2SS uses a periplasmic pseudo-
63 pilus to expel the substrates in the external medium such as a piston or an Archimedes screw

64 [26]. By artificially increasing the number of pseudo-pilins, μm -long pili can be observed at
65 the cell surface, suggesting that pseudo-pilus length is determined, in part, by the number of
66 available subunits [27,28]. A strict control of the number of subunits in the cell by finely
67 tuned gene expression and protein stability levels would prevent the costly synthesis of
68 unnecessary subunits. To test whether T6SS sheath length might be controlled by the number
69 of available tail subunits, we modified the stoichiometry balance by deregulating the levels of
70 tube/sheath subunits, Hcp, TssB and TssC. TssA, which locates at the distal end of the
71 growing sheath to coordinate the assembly of the tail tube/sheath [29-31], and the TagA
72 stopper [31,32] were not included in the study as single TssA and TagA complexes are
73 responsible for promoting T6SS tail elongation and arrest. *tssB-sfGFP*, and epitope-tagged
74 *tssC* and *hcp*, were cloned into the pTrc99A vector, under the IPTG-inducible *ptrc* promoter.
75 Pilot experiments showed that the production of TssB-sfGFP, TssC and Hcp can be tightly
76 controlled by varying the IPTG inducer concentrations from 0 to 250 μM in the culture
77 medium. However, although we do not know whether it results from protein aggregation or
78 stoichiometric unbalance, we noticed that IPTG concentrations higher than 50 μM yielded
79 non-functional T6SSs, as no dynamic sheath structures were observable by fluorescence
80 microscopy. Nevertheless, with IPTG concentrations ranging from 0 to 10 μM , we observed
81 an increase in TssB-sfGFP, TssC and Hcp protein levels up to \sim 14-18 fold (Figure 2A)
82 without affecting T6SS sheath formation and dynamics (Figure 2B). However, sheath length
83 measurement analyses did not reveal striking differences (Figure 2B, 2C and Figure S1).
84 Collectively, our results therefore argue against a direct correlation between the abundance of
85 T6SS tail subunits and T6SS sheath length.

86

87 **T6SS sheath length is not regulated by a tape measure protein.**

88 The length of contractile bacteriophage tails is dictated by a tape measure protein (TMP) [18-
89 20,33,34]. Such a ruler mechanism has been also evidenced or proposed for other CISs such
90 as antifeeding prophages and *Photorhabdus* virulence cassettes, or non-contractile structures
91 such as T3SS injectisome needles in *Yersinia*, or the bacterial hook in *Salmonella* [21,22,35-
92 38]. Although bacterial T6SSs have been shown to be structurally and functionally related to
93 contractile bacteriophages [6], and contrarily to R-pyocins, AFP, PVC or ACS gene clusters
94 [21,22,35], no gene encoding a potential TMP can be found within T6SS clusters [39]. In
95 addition, previous experiments showing T6SS tail sheath extension in *Vibrio cholerae*
96 spheroplasts [40] and in EAEC and *V. cholerae tagA* mutants [31,32] suggested that longer
97 tails assemble in the cell, hence arguing against a tape measure-like mechanism. To discard
98 this hypothesis, we sought to reposition the T6SS at the cell pole to follow the assembly of the
99 T6SS in the long axis of the cell body. In these conditions, the presence of a TMP would
100 cause an arrest of tail extension in the cytoplasm, whereas the tail will extend towards the
101 opposite cell pole or until no tail subunit is available for a TMP-independent mechanism.
102 T6SS biogenesis starts with the assembly of the membrane complex (MC) [7,15]. The T6SS
103 MC is composed of the TssJ outer membrane lipoprotein, and TssL and TssM inner
104 membrane proteins [14]. Its biogenesis starts with the positioning of TssJ and is pursued by
105 the sequential recruitment of TssM and TssL [15]. The MC initially positions along the cell
106 body with an underrepresentation at the cell pole [15,25]. To reposition T6SS MCs at the cell
107 pole, we fused TssM to the *Bacillus subtilis* polar/septal determinant DivIVA. This approach
108 has been successfully used to relocate the T4SS VirD4 coupling protein to the cell pole in
109 *Agrobacterium* cells [41]. A fragment encoding the *B. subtilis divIVA* gene was inserted on
110 the chromosome, downstream the *tssM* ATG start codon and in frame with the *tssM* coding
111 sequence, to engineer a *divIVA-tssM* fusion. Because TssL is the last component to be
112 recruited during MC biogenesis [15], we then imaged TssL fused to sfGFP in these cells.

113 Statistical analyses of sfGFP-TssL position, that hence reflects the localization of the fully-
114 assembled T6SS MC [15], demonstrated that sfGFP-TssL forms ~32% of polar foci in
115 presence of DivIVA-TssM, by contrast to the wild-type cells, with ~16% of polar foci (Figure
116 3A, 3B). Introduction of the *divIVA-tssM* fusion into *tssB-sfGFP* EAEC cells showed that few
117 T6SS tails assemble from the pole suggesting that polar-localized MCs are less functional.
118 However, the number of tail polymerizations starting from the cell pole was significantly
119 increased with the relocation of the MC compared to wild-type cells. Statistical analyses
120 showed that these extensions from the poles lead to significantly longer tails (Figure 3C), with
121 a mean equal to $1.05 \pm 0.42 \mu\text{m}$ ($n = 75$). Sheaths that crossed the entire cell body with length
122 up to $3.5 \mu\text{m}$ (corresponding to outliers in Figure 3C), and capable of contraction were readily
123 observed (Figure 3D). Taken together, these data demonstrate that T6SS tails could be
124 artificially extended by relocalization of the MC at the cell pole, and hence that sheath length
125 is not regulated by a TMP-mediated ruler mechanism.

126

127 **T6SS tail sheath length is dictated by the cell width.**

128 In all the images recorded, we observed that sheaths extend towards and stop when in contact
129 with the opposite membrane. As the membrane mechanically defines the cell limits, one may
130 hypothesize that the distance between the two opposite membrane positions is sufficient to
131 determine sheath length. Indeed, the measure of the distance between the two membranes in
132 cells analyzed in Figure 1 showed a cell width average of $0.86 \mu\text{m} \pm 0.07$, which is
133 comparable to the sheath length ($0.76 \mu\text{m} \pm 0.11$), specifically if we take into account the
134 widths of the membranes, of the cytoplasmic portion of the MC, and of the BP [8,9,15,16]. To
135 further investigate the impact of cell width on T6SS sheath length, we treated EAEC cells
136 producing TssB-sfGFP with A22, a drug that causes cell shape defects by targeting the

137 cytoskeletal MreB protein. As expected, we observed a significant impact on cell morphology
138 with a trend to cell rounding (Figure 4A). In these conditions, we observed T6SS sheaths with
139 length varying from 0.7 to 2 μm (Figure 4A). However, when sheath length was plotted
140 against cell width, a strict correlation is observed (Kendall's $\tau = 0.82$) (Figure 4B). In addition,
141 the value of the slope, close to 1 ($m = 0.92$), demonstrates that sheath length is directly
142 proportional to cell width, which is also confirmed by sheath length/cell width ratio
143 calculations (Figure 4C). Similarly to wild-type cells [32], the distal extremity of these longer
144 extended sheaths co-localized with TagA (Figure 4D). We therefore conclude that T6SS
145 sheath length depends on cell width, and that T6SS sheath polymerization is arrested upon
146 contact with the opposite membrane, likely by the TagA stopper.

147

148 **Concluding remarks**

149 In this study, we have shown that the T6SS tails in EAEC cells have a defined length. Our
150 further analyses demonstrated that the length of the T6SS tail is not determined by a tape
151 measure protein or by the number of available tail tube/sheath subunits, but rather by the
152 distance between the baseplate and the opposite membrane. This mechanism contrasts with
153 the TMP-dependent regulation found in most contractile tailed machines. However it is in
154 agreement with the fact that no putative TMP-encoding genes are encoded on T6SS gene
155 clusters [5,39]. In TMP-dependent contractile tails, it has been shown that a strict correlation
156 exists between the number of TMP residues and the length of cognate sheaths [21,22]. An
157 extrapolation for the T6SS would mean that a sheath of 0.76 μm corresponds to a TMP of ~
158 5,000 amino-acids. Such a protein is not encoded within T6SS gene clusters. Finally, the
159 observation that DivIV-mediated relocalisation of the MC to the cell pole yields extra-long
160 sheath structures demonstrates that no TMP is involved. The assembly of extra-long sheaths

161 also suggests that the number of subunits necessary to assemble a tail tube/sheath is not
162 limiting in the bacterial cytoplasm, and hence that sheath length is not regulated by the
163 number of available tail subunits. Indeed, this hypothesis was also discarded by artificially
164 modulating the levels of T6SS tail subunits, demonstrating that it does not influence tail
165 sheath length. This results is also in agreement with the recent measurement of T6SS subunits
166 abundance demonstrating that tail tube/sheath components are not limiting in *Acinetobacter*
167 *baylyi*, *V. cholerae*, or *P. aeruginosa* cells [42]. All our observations therefore argue for an
168 arrest of sheath polymerization at the opposite membrane. This hypothesis is likely, as
169 altering the distance between the two membranes by using A22, an antagonist of the MreB
170 morphological determinant, showed a strict correlation between membrane width and sheath
171 length. We conclude that tail tube/sheath polymerization stops when it hits the opposite
172 membrane. In most cases, the assembly of the T6SS tubular structure starts perpendicular to
173 the membrane and hence, the length of the sheath correlates with the cell width. However,
174 when T6SS tail assembly starts non-perpendicularly, its polymerization will proceed until it
175 touches the opposite membrane boundary. This model is also consistent with the recent
176 identification of TagA, a membrane-bound protein that binds to the distal extremity of the
177 growing tail and stops tube/sheath polymerization in EAEC and *V. cholerae* [31,32]. However,
178 TagA is not a universal stopper as recordings of sheath dynamics of TagA⁺ T6SS (*V.*
179 *cholerae*) or T6SSs lacking TagA (*Acinetobacter baylyi*, *P. aeruginosa* H1, *S. enterica*
180 Typhimurium, *Francisella novicida*) showed that sheaths extend to and stop at the opposite
181 membrane [40, 42-45]. It would be interesting to define how T6SS sheath polymerization is
182 stopped in bacterial species lacking TagA.

183 In conclusion, T6SS has evolved to use a mechanism of tail length control distinct
184 from other CISs. We thus propose a model in which T6SS tail length is determined by the
185 distance to the opposite membrane. In EAEC, and likely other TagA⁺ species, proper arrest of

186 tail tube/sheath polymerization is mediated by the TagA stopper by binding to the TssA cap
187 protein once the distal end of the sheath hits the opposite membrane. .

188

189 **Acknowledgments**

190 We thank Abdelrahim Zoued for constructing plasmid pKD4-YFP, Adrien Ducret for advices
191 regarding the use of MicrobeJ, Handuo Shi, Kerwyn Casey Huang (Stanford University, USA),
192 Daisuke Shiomi (Rykyo University, Tokyo, Japan), and laboratory members for discussion, Moly Ba,
193 Isabelle Bringer, Annick Brun, and Olivier Uderso for technical assistance, and Lydie Odu-Vilaj for
194 encouragements. This work was funded by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, the Aix-
195 Marseille Université, and grants from the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR-14-CE14-0006-02,
196 ANR-17-CE11-0039-01), the Fondation pour la Recherche Médicale (DEQ20180339165), and the
197 Fondation Bettencourt-Schueller to EC. YGS is supported by a doctoral fellowship from the French
198 ministry of higher education and research. The funders had no role in study design, data collection and
199 interpretation, or the decision to submit the work for publication.

200

201 **Authors contributions**

202 Y.G.S. and E.C. designed research; Y.G.S., T.D. and E.C. performed research; Y.G.S.
203 performed statistical analyses; Y.G.S., T.D., and E.C. analyzed data; L.J. provided expertise
204 and feedback; Y.G.S. and E.C. wrote the paper with contributions from T.D. and L.J.

205

206 **Declaration of interests**

207 The authors declare no competing interests.

208

209 **Legend to Figures**

210 **Figure 1. Statistical measure of the EAEC T6SS sheath length.** (A) Representative
211 fluorescence micrograph of EAEC cells producing TssB-sfGFP and labelled with FM4-64
212 (upper panel, phase channel; lower panel, merge of GFP and FM4-64 channels). Scale bar, 1
213 μm . (B) Representative fluorescence micrograph of EAEC cells producing TssB-CFP and
214 YFP-TagA, and labeled with FM4-64 (upper panel, phase channel; lower panel, merge of
215 CFP, YFP, and FM4-64 channels). The open arrowheads point T6SS extended sheaths in
216 contact with the TagA stopper. Scale bar, 1 μm . (C) Violin plot representation of the sheath
217 length in wild-type cells. The distribution of the sheath lengths is represented by the outer
218 shape. The bold horizontal bar represents the median value (median = 0.76 μm); the lower
219 and upper boundaries of the internal box plot correspond to the 25th and 75th percentiles
220 respectively; whiskers extend 1.5 times the interquartile range from the 25th and 75th
221 percentiles. The number of measured sheaths ($n=150$) is indicated above.

222 **Figure 2. T6SS tail tube/sheath subunits levels do not determine T6SS sheath length.** (A)
223 Western-blot analyses of tail tube/sheath component abundance. 2×10^8 cells of $\Delta\text{tssBC}\Delta\text{hcp}$
224 cells producing TssB-sfGFP (TssB_{sfGFP}), 6 \times His-tagged TssC (TssC_{6His}) and FLAG-tagged
225 Hcp (Hcp_{FLAG}) from the pTrc-B_{GFP}-C_{6H}-Hcp_F grown in presence of 0.4% of glucose or of the
226 indicated concentration of IPTG were subjected to 12.5% acrylamide SDS-PAGE and
227 immunodetected with anti-GFP, -His, -FLAG and -EF-Tu monoclonal primary antibodies and
228 secondary antibodies coupled to AlexaFluor[®] 680. The EF-Tu cytoplasmic elongation factor
229 is used as loading control. The increased fold values compared to the glucose condition,
230 measured by densitometric quantification of the band signal intensities and relative to the
231 loading control, are indicated below. Molecular weight markers (in kDa) are indicated on left.
232 (B-C) Representative fluorescence microscopy recordings (B) and statistical analyses of
233 sheath length measurements (C) of $\Delta\text{tssBC}\Delta\text{hcp}$ cells producing Hcp_{FLAG}, TssB-sfGFP and

234 TssC_{6His} in presence of 0.4% glucose or of the indicated concentration of IPTG, and labelled
235 with FM4-64 (left panels, phase channel; right panels, merge of GFP and FM4-64 channels).
236 Scale bar, 2 μ m. In the violin plot representation of the statistical analysis, the distribution of
237 the sheath length is represented by the outer shape. The bold horizontal bar represents the
238 median; the lower and upper boundaries of the internal box plot correspond to the 25th and
239 75th percentiles respectively; whiskers extend 1.5 times the interquartile range from the 25th
240 and 75th percentiles. Outliers are shown as black dots. Statistical significance from three
241 independent assays ($n=100$ for each conditions) relative to the glucose condition is indicated
242 above the plots (ns, non-significative; ***, $p < 0.001$; two-tailed Student's t -test). A
243 comparison of tail tube/sheath subunits levels and sheath lengths is shown in Figure S1.

244 **Figure 3. Sheath length is not controlled by a tape measure protein.** Representative
245 fluorescence microscopy recordings of EAEC cells producing sfGFP-TssL in WT (*A*) or
246 DivIV-TssM (*B*) cells, and labelled with FM4-64 (upper panels, phase channel; lower panels,
247 merge of GFP and FM4-64 channels). White and blue arrowheads indicate TssL foci with
248 body or polar localizations, respectively. Scale bar, 2 μ m. The spatial repartition of sfGFP-
249 TssL foci is shown on right, as a projection of foci from $n=152$ and $n=151$ WT and DivIVA-
250 TssM cells, respectively, on a single cell (from blue to yellow, see heatmap color chart on
251 right of panel *A*). The percentage of sfGFP-TssL foci with polar localization is indicated
252 below. (*C*) Violin plot representation of sheath length measurements in DivIVA-TssM cells
253 producing TssB-sfGFP (red). An example of a representative microscopy field is shown in the
254 inset (scale bar, 2 μ m). The distribution of sheath length in WT cells (shown in Figure 1*B*) is
255 reported in transparency for comparison (blue). The distribution of the sheath length is
256 represented by the outer shape. The bold horizontal bar represents the median value (median
257 = 0.93 μ m and 0.76 μ m for DivIVA-TssM and WT cells, respectively); the lower and upper
258 boundaries of the internal box plot correspond to the 25th and 75th percentiles respectively;

259 whiskers extend 1.5 times the interquartile range from the 25th and 75th percentiles. Outliers
260 are shown as black dots. The number of measured sheaths ($n=75$) is indicated below.
261 Statistical significance relative to WT cells is indicated above the plots (***, $p < 0.001$; one-
262 tailed Wilcoxon's t -test). (D) Fluorescence microscopy time-lapse recordings of DivIVA-
263 TssM cells producing TssB-sfGFP highlighting polar T6SS sheath assembly (white
264 arrowhead) and contraction (blue arrowhead). Scale bar, 2 μm .

265 **Figure 4. Cell width dictates T6SS sheath length.** (A) Representative fluorescence
266 micrographs of EAEC cells producing TssB-sfGFP in absence (upper panel) or in presence of
267 the MreB inhibitor A22 (lower panel), and labelled with FM4-64 (upper panel, phase channel;
268 lower panel, merge of GFP and FM4-64 channels). Scale bar, 2 μm . (B) Plot representation
269 showing the relationship between sheath length and cell width in absence (blue) and presence
270 of A22 (orange). The dashed line represents the mean of the WT cell width (mean = 0.87 μm).
271 Value of the slope (m) is indicated on right. Kendall's $\tau = 0.82$. (C) Dotplot of the ratios
272 between sheath length and the width of the corresponding cell from cells grown in absence
273 (blue) or presence of A22 (orange). Horizontal bars represent the mean in each condition. The
274 values of the means and standard deviations are indicated above the plots. The number of
275 analyzed cells (n) is indicated below. (D) Representative fluorescence micrograph of EAEC
276 cells producing TssB-CFP and YFP-TagA in presence of the MreB inhibitor A22, and
277 labelled with FM4-64 (left panel, phase channel; right panel, merge of CFP, YFP, and FM4-
278 64 channels). The open arrowheads point T6SS extended sheaths in contact with the TagA
279 stopper. Scale bar, 2 μm .

280

281 **STAR METHODS**

282

283 **LEAD CONTACT AND MATERIALS AVAILABILITY**

284 Further information and requests for resources and reagents should be directed to and will be
285 fulfilled by the Lead Contact, Eric Cascales (cascales@imm.cnrs.fr). There are no restrictions
286 to the availability of reagents.

287

288 **EXPERIMENTAL MODEL AND SUBJECT DETAILS**

289 Strains used in this study are listed in Table S1. *Escherichia coli* DH5 α (New England
290 Biolabs) or CC118 λ pir have been used for cloning procedures. Enteroaggregative *E. coli*
291 (EAEC) strains used in this work are isogenic derivatives of the wild-type O3:H2 17-2 strain.
292 The wild-type 17-2 strain and its TssB-sfGFP [46], sfGFP-TssL [15], TssB-CFP/YFP-TagA
293 (this work), and DivIVA-TssM (this work) derivatives have been used for *in vivo* studies. *E.*
294 *coli* cells were routinely grown in Lysogeny broth (LB) broth at 37°C, with aeration. For
295 induction of the *sciI* T6SS gene cluster, cells were grown in Sci1-inducing medium [SIM: M9
296 minimal medium supplemented with glycerol 0.25 %, vitamin B1 200 $\mu\text{g.mL}^{-1}$,
297 casaminoacids 40 $\mu\text{g.mL}^{-1}$, MgCl₂ 2 mM, CaCl₂ 0.1 mM, and LB (10% v/v)] [24]. Plasmids
298 and chromosomal deletions and insertions were maintained by the addition of kanamycin (50
299 $\mu\text{g.mL}^{-1}$), or ampicillin (100 $\mu\text{g.mL}^{-1}$). Gene expression from pTrc99A derivative plasmids
300 was induced at $A_{600 \text{ nm}} \approx 0.4$ by the addition of 2-10 μM of isopropyl- β -D-thio-
301 galactopyranoside (IPTG, Sigma-Aldrich). The MreB antagonist S-(3,4-
302 dichlorobenzyl)isothiourea hydrochloride (known as A22 [47], purchased from Sigma-
303 Aldrich) has been added to the culture at the concentration of 10 $\mu\text{g.mL}^{-1}$ for 2 hours prior
304 analyses. Membranes were stained with 10 $\mu\text{g.mL}^{-1}$ of the N-(3-triethylammoniumpropyl)-4-
305 (6-(4-(diethylamino) phenyl) hexatrienyl) pyridinium dibromide dye (FM4-64, Molecular
306 Probes, Life technologies).

307

308 **METHOD DETAILS**

309 **Plasmid construction.** All plasmids used in this study are listed in Table S2.
310 Oligonucleotides used for plasmid construction are listed in Table S3. pTrc99A [48] and
311 pKD4 [49] plasmid derivatives were engineered by ligation-free restriction-free cloning. PCR
312 amplification were performed in a Biometra thermocycler using the Q5[®] DNA polymerase
313 (New England Biolabs). Briefly, the fragment of interest was amplified and then used as
314 oligonucleotides for a second PCR for amplification of the target plasmid. For construction of
315 pTrc-B_{GFP}-C_{6His}, a fragment encoding *tssB-sfGFP* and *tssC-6×His* was amplified from EAEC
316 17-2 TssB-sfGFP [46] genomic DNA using primers
317 *GGATAACAATTCACACAGGAAACAGACCATGAGCAGTTCGTTTCAGAATGAAATCC*
318 C and
319 *CCCGGGTACCGAGCTCGAATTCTTAATGGTGATGGTGATGATGCGCTTTTGCCTTC*
320 *GGCATCTGC* (6×His tag sequence underlined, sequence annealing on the target pTrc99A
321 plasmid [48] italicized), and inserted into pTrc99A. The *hcp* gene was amplified from EAEC
322 17-2 genomic DNA using primers
323 *GCGCATCATCACCATCACCATTAAGAATTaggaggtattacaccATGGCAATTCAGTTTA*
324 *TCTGTGGCTG* and
325 *GGATCCCCGGGTACCGAGCTCGTTACTTGTCATCGTCATCTTTATAATCCGCGGTGG*
326 *TACGCTCACTCC* (FLAG tag sequence italicized, sequence annealing on the target pTrc-
327 B_{GFP}-C_{6H} plasmid underlined, Shine-Dalgarno ribosome-binding site in lower case), and
328 inserted into pTrc-B_{GFP}-C_{6His} to yield pTrc-B_{GFP}-C_{6H}-Hcp_F. For construction of plasmid
329 pKD4-DivIVA-Nt allowing chromosomal insertion of *divIVA* at the 5'-end of genes, the
330 *divIVA* gene was amplified from *Bacillus subtilis* str. 168 using primers
331 *GGAACTTCGGAATAGGAACTAAGGAGGATATTCATATGCCATTAACGCCAAATG*
332 *ATATTCACAACAAGAC* and

333 GCTGACATGGGAATTAGCCATGGTCCCCTCCGCCGGCCGCTGCTTCCTTTTCCTCA
334 AATACAGCGTCGACTTC (3×Ala-3×Gly sequence linker italicized, sequence annealing on
335 the target pKD4 plasmid underlined), and inserted into plasmid pKD4 [49]. For construction
336 of plasmid pKD4-CFP-Ct allowing chromosomal insertion of *ecfp* at the 3'-end of genes, the
337 *ecfp* gene was amplified from the pTrc99A-ecfp vector (gift from Leon Espinosa, LCB,
338 Marseille, France) using primers
339 GATTGCAGCATTACACGTCTTGAGCGATTGCAGCGGCCGGCGGAGGGGTGAGCAA
340 GGGCGAGGAGC and
341 GAACTTCGAAGCAGCTCCAGCCTACACTTACTTGTACAGCTCGTCCATGCCG
342 (3×Ala-3×Gly sequence linker italicized, sequence annealing on the target pKD4 plasmid
343 underlined), and inserted into plasmid pKD4 [49]. For construction of plasmid pKD4-YFP-Nt
344 allowing chromosomal insertion of *eyfp* at the 5'-end of genes, the *eyfp* gene was amplified
345 from the pCBP-EYFP vector (gift from Emmanuelle Bouveret, Institut Pasteur, Paris, France)
346 using primers
347 CGGAATAGGAACTAAGGAGGATATTCATATGGTGAGCAAGGGCGAGGAGC and
348 CGGCTGACATGGGAATTAGCCATGGTCCCCTCCGCCGGCCGCTGCCTTGTACAGC
349 TCGTCCATGCCGAGAG (3×Ala-3×Gly sequence linker italicized, sequence annealing on
350 the target pKD4 plasmid underlined), and inserted into plasmid pKD4 [49]. All plasmids were
351 verified by colony-PCR and DNA sequencing (Eurofins genomics).

352 **Strain construction.** Strains were engineered by λ -red recombination [49] using plasmid
353 pKOBEG [50] and PCR products (oligonucleotides listed in Table S3). Briefly, a kanamycin
354 cassette was amplified from plasmids pKD4, pKD4-DivIVA-Nt, pKD4-CFP-Ct, or pKD4-
355 YFP-Nt, using oligonucleotides carrying 50-nucleotide extensions homologous to regions
356 adjacent to the gene of interest. Cassette allowing deletion of the *hcp* gene was generated
357 using the pKD4 vector template with primers

358 TCCCCTGCGCCGGAAGAGGGCGCATCAGAAAACATAACGGAGTAATTTTTTGTGT
359 AGGCTGGAGCTGCTTCG and
360 TGAAGAAAAAATAAAAATGACGGACAGGATGCCCTGTCCGTCCGGCAGAACATA
361 TGAATATCCTCCTTAGTTCC (50-bp sequence annealing on the 5' and 3' regions of the
362 deleted gene underlined). For chromosomal insertion of DivIVA at the *tssM* locus, the
363 DivIVA cassette was generated using the pKD4-DivIVA-Nt vector with primers
364 TTTCATCCGGAGAAGAACATTTTATCAGTACTGTTACATCAGGAAACCAGAATG
365 AATAACGATTGTGTAGGCTGGAGCTGCTTCGAAGTTCCTATAC and
366 CACACCAATAAATACAATCCCCGGTCGCCCAAAGCGACCAGACAGACAGGCCAG
367 TTTATTCCTCCGCCGGCCGCTGC (50-bp sequence annealing on the 5' and 3' regions of
368 the *tssM* ATG start codon underlined). For chromosomal insertion of CFP at the *tssB* locus,
369 the *cfp* cassette was generated using the pKD4-CFP-Ct vector with primers
370 CCGGCACTGAGTCAGACGCTGCGTGATGAACTGCGTGCACTGGTGCCGGAAAAG
371 GCGGCAGCGGCCGGCGGAGGG and
372 GCAACGTTCTTTTCTTTCTGTACAGACATCAGCATTCTCTCGTAATCCGTTAAA
373 CATATGAATATCCTCCTTAGTTCCTATTCCGAAGTTCC (50-bp sequence annealing on
374 the 5' and 3' regions of the *tssB* TAA stop codon underlined). For chromosomal insertion of
375 YFP at the *tagA* locus, the *yfp* cassette was generated using the pKD4-YFP-Nt vector with
376 primers
377 CTTTTCGTCACTGTTAATCATGATTTAATACAGCAACACCGAATCTGCCGCGATTG
378 TGTAGGCTGGAGCTGCTTCGAAGTTCCTATAC and
379 TCCGGTAATGACCGGGGGTCACCACCGGTTTTTCAGTTTCACTTCAGAAGTCCCTC
380 CGCCGGCCGCTGC (50-bp sequence annealing on the 5' and 3' regions of the *tagA* ATG
381 start codon underlined). Cassette amplicons were column-purified (NucleoSpin[®] Gel and PCR
382 clean-up, Macherey Nagel), and 600 ng were electroporated into electrocompetent target cells

383 (*ΔtssBC* for *Δhcp*; 17-2, sfGFP-TssL and TssB-sfGFP for DivIVA; 17-2 for YFP-TagA; YFP-
384 TagA for TssB-CFP), kanamycin-resistant clones were selected and verified by colony-PCR.
385 When possible, kanamycin cassettes were excised by the FRT-specific FLP recombinase
386 using vector pCP20 [49].

387 **SDS-PAGE, Western-blotting, imaging and quantification analyses.** Standard methods
388 were used for sodium dodecyl-sulfate poly-acrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE) and
389 protein transfer on nitrocellulose membranes. Membranes were probed with anti-GFP (clone
390 7.1, Roche), anti-His (clone His1, Sigma), anti-FLAG (clone M2, Sigma), and anti-EF-Tu
391 (clone mAb900, HyCult Biotech) monoclonal antibodies, and goat anti-mouse secondary
392 antibodies coupled to AlexaFluor[®] 680 (Invitrogen). Images were recorded at $\lambda=700$ nm using
393 an Odyssey[®] infrared imaging system (LI-COR Biosciences). Image analyses were performed
394 with the ImageJ processing program using the Fiji interface [51], as previously described [52].
395 Briefly, the image was first converted to grayscale in .jpg format. The rectangle tool of
396 ImageJ was used to select a rectangular area of the size corresponding to the lane width, in
397 order to cover the minimal area to contain the whole of the largest band. The same frame was
398 used to select each TssB, TssC, Hcp or EF-Tu band. For each selection, the number of pixels
399 was calculated. A control region with no band was also selected to subtract the background.
400 The number of pixels of each band, subtracted from the background, was then divided by the
401 EF-Tu loading control intensity at the same IPTG concentration, to compensate for loading
402 differences. The fold-change relative to the glucose sample was then calculated.

403 **Fluorescence microscopy and statistical analyses.** Cells were grown in SIM to a $A_{600\text{ nm}} \approx$
404 0.6–0.8, harvested and resuspended in fresh SIM to a $A_{600\text{ nm}} \approx 10$. For inhibition of MreB
405 function, cells grown in SIM were treated at $A_{600\text{ nm}} \approx 0.3$ for 2 hours with $10\ \mu\text{g}\cdot\text{mL}^{-1}$ of A22
406 prior to data acquisition, as previously published [53]. For membrane staining, cells were

407 labelled with FM4-64 ($10 \mu\text{g.mL}^{-1}$) for 2 min prior to centrifugation. Concentrated cell
408 mixtures were spotted on a thin pad of SIM supplemented with 2% agarose, or 2% agarose
409 and A22 ($10 \mu\text{g.mL}^{-1}$), covered with a cover slip, and incubated for 20-30 min at room
410 temperature before microscopy acquisition. Fluorescence microscopy was performed on a
411 Nikon Eclipse Ti microscope equipped with an Orcaflash 4.0 LT digital camera (Hamamatsu)
412 and a perfect focus system (PFS) to automatically maintain focus so that the point of interest
413 within a specimen is always kept in sharp focus at all times despite mechanical or thermal
414 perturbations. All fluorescence images were acquired with a minimal exposure time to
415 minimize bleaching and phototoxicity effects. Exposure times were typically 30 ms for phase
416 contrast, 200 ms for TssB-sfGFP, 300 ms for TssB-CFP, 1 s for sfGFP-TssL, 1.5 s for YFP-
417 TagA, and 50 ms for FM4-64. The experiments were performed at least in triplicate and a
418 representative result is shown. Images were analyzed using ImageJ (<http://imagej.nih.gov/ij/>)
419 and the MicrobeJ v5.11y plugin (<http://www.microbej.com/>) [54].

420

421 **QUANTIFICATION AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS**

422 Statistical analyses of microscopy images were performed with several representative fields
423 from at least three independent biological replicates, using Excel and the R software
424 environment. The number of measured cells or events (n) is indicated on each figure.
425 Differences in sheath length between groups were examined by unpaired parametric Student t
426 test or nonparametric Wilcoxon t test. Relationship between sheath length and cell width was
427 examined by Mann-Kendall test. Significance was defined by $p < 0.001$ (***) and $p < 0.0001$
428 (****).

429

430 **DATA AND CODE AVAILABILITY**

431 This study did not generate datasets and codes.

432

433

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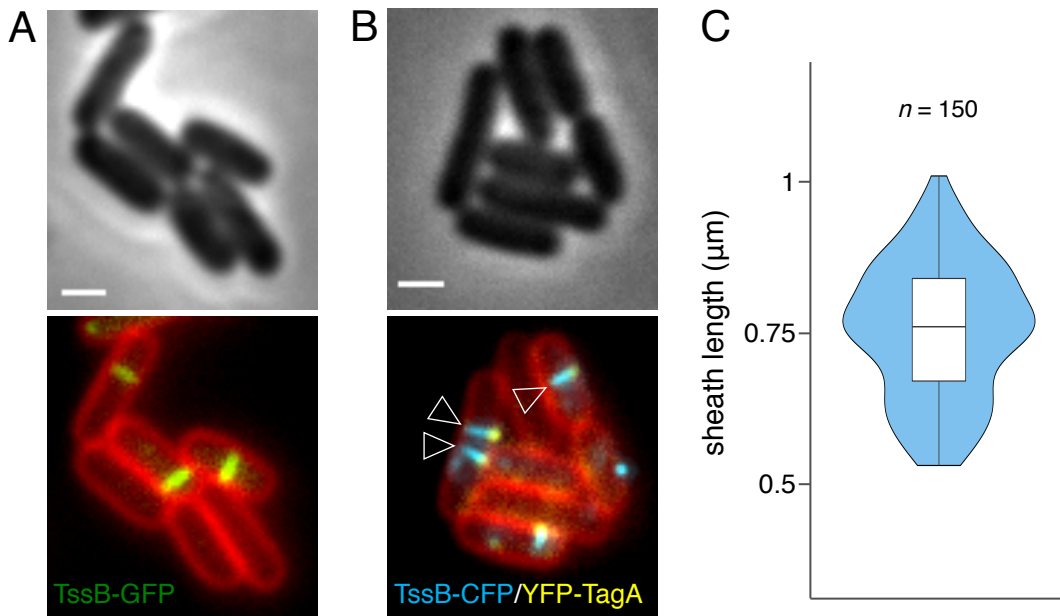


Fig. 1. Statistical measure of the EAEC T6SS sheath length. (A) Representative fluorescence micrograph of EAEC cells producing TssB-sfGFP and labelled with FM4-64 (upper panel, phase channel; lower panel, merge of GFP and FM4-64 channels). Scale bar, 1 μm . (B) Representative fluorescence micrograph of EAEC cells producing TssB-CFP and YFP-TagA, and labeled with FM4-64 (upper panel, phase channel; lower panel, merge of CFP, YFP, and FM4-64 channels). The open arrowheads point T6SS extended sheaths in contact with the TagA stopper. Scale bar, 1 μm . (C) Violin plot representation of the sheath length in wild-type cells. The distribution of the sheath lengths is represented by the outer shape. The bold horizontal bar represents the median value (median = 0.76 μm); the lower and upper boundaries of the internal box plot correspond to the 25th and 75th percentiles respectively; whiskers extend 1.5 times the interquartile range from the 25th and 75th percentiles. The number of measured sheaths ($n=150$) is indicated above.

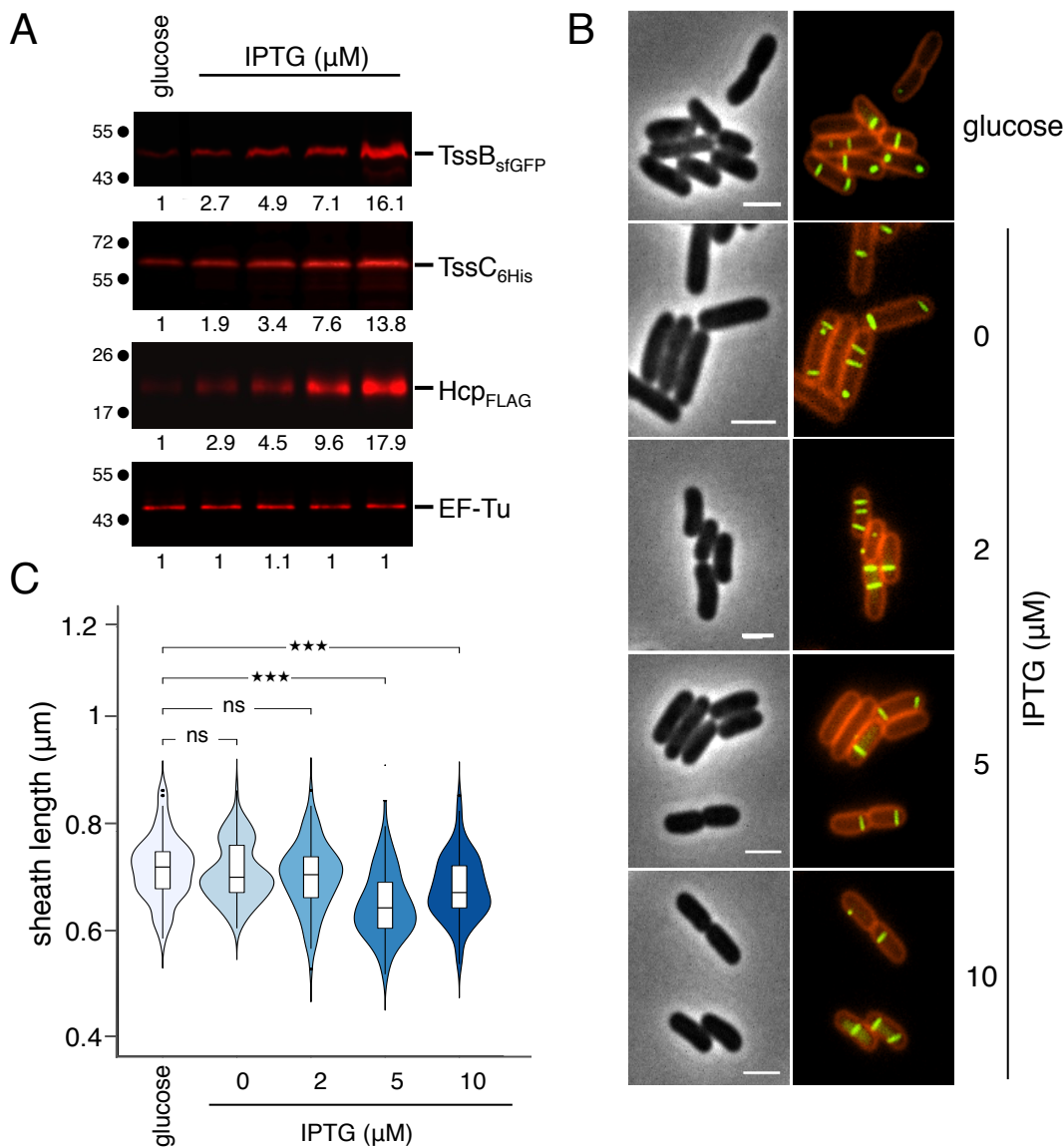
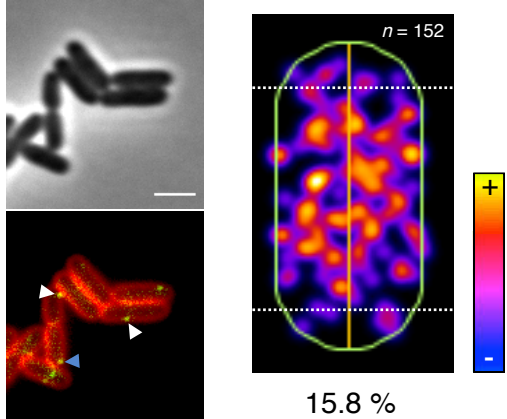
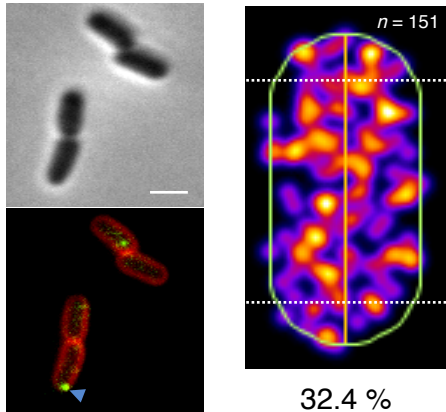


Fig. 2. T6SS tail tube/sheath subunits levels do not determine T6SS sheath length. (A) Western-blot analyses of tail tube/sheath component abundance. 2×10^8 cells of $\Delta tssBC\Delta hcp$ cells producing TssB-sfGFP (TssB_{sfGFP}), 6 \times His-tagged TssC (TssC_{6His}) and FLAG-tagged Hcp (Hcp_{FLAG}) from the pTrc-B_{GFP}-C_{6H}-Hcp_F grown in presence of 0.4% of glucose or of the indicated concentration of IPTG were subjected to 12.5% acrylamide SDS-PAGE and immunodetected with anti-GFP, -His, -FLAG and -EF-Tu monoclonal primary antibodies and secondary antibodies coupled to AlexaFluor[®] 680. The EF-Tu cytoplasmic elongation factor is used as loading control. The increased fold values compared to the glucose condition, measured by densitometric quantification of the band signal intensities and relative to the loading control, are indicated below. Molecular weight markers (in kDa) are indicated on left. (B-C) Representative fluorescence microscopy recordings (B) and statistical analyses of sheath length measurements (C) of $\Delta tssBC\Delta hcp$ cells producing Hcp_{FLAG}, TssB-sfGFP and TssC_{6His} in presence of 0.4% glucose or of the indicated concentration of IPTG, and labelled with FM4-64 (left panels, phase channel; right panels, merge of GFP and FM4-64 channels). Scale bar, 2 μ m. In the violin plot representation of the statistical analysis, the distribution of the sheath length is represented by the outer shape. The bold horizontal bar represents the median; the lower and upper boundaries of the internal box plot correspond to the 25th and 75th percentiles respectively; whiskers extend 1.5 times the interquartile range from the 25th and 75th percentiles. Outliers are shown as black dots. Statistical significance from three independent assays ($n = 100$ for each conditions) relative to the glucose condition is indicated above the plots (ns, non-significant; ***, $p < 0.001$; two-tailed Student's t -test). A comparison of tail tube/sheath subunits levels and sheath lengths is shown in Fig. S1.

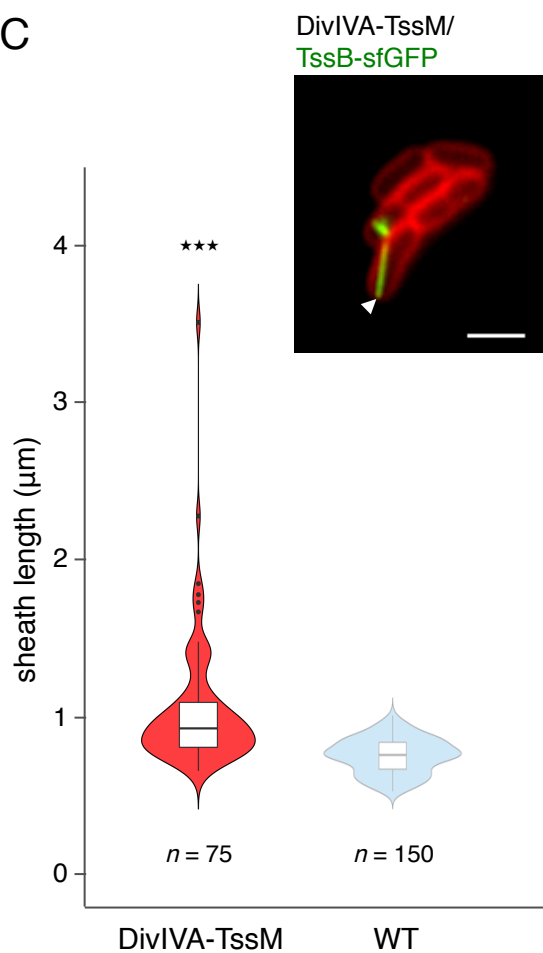
A WT/sfGFP-TssL



B DivIVA-TssM/sfGFP-TssL



C



D DivIVA-TssM/TssB-sfGFP

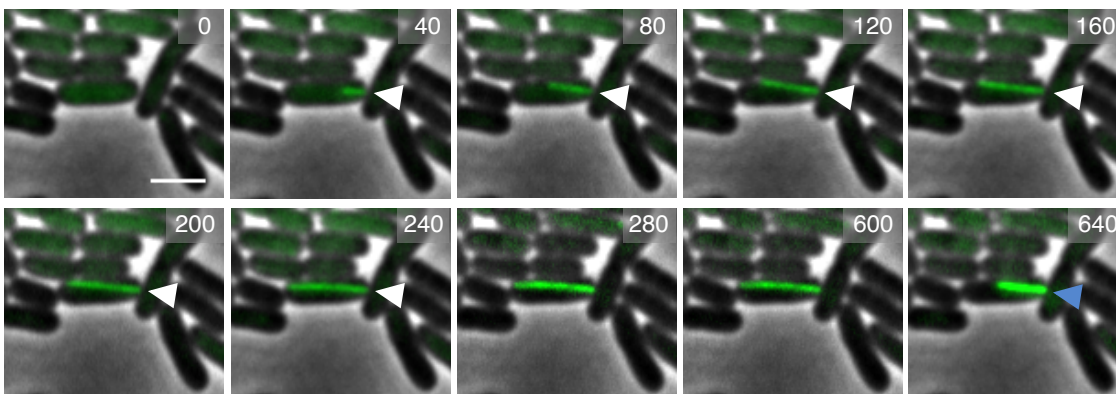


Fig. 3. Sheath length is not controlled by a tape measure protein. Representative fluorescence microscopy recordings of EAEC cells producing sfGFP-TssL in WT (*A*) or DivIV-TssM (*B*) cells, and labelled with FM4-64 (upper panels, phase channel; lower panels, merge of GFP and FM4-64 channels). White and blue arrowheads indicate TssL foci with body or polar localizations, respectively. Scale bar, 2 μm . The spatial repartition of sfGFP-TssL foci is shown on right, as a projection of foci from $n=152$ and $n=151$ WT and DivIVA-TssM cells, respectively, on a single cell (from blue to yellow, see heatmap color chart on right of panel *A*). The percentage of sfGFP-TssL foci with polar localization is indicated below. (*C*) Violin plot representation of sheath length measurements in DivIVA-TssM cells producing TssB-sfGFP (red). An example of a representative microscopy field is shown in the inset (scale bar, 2 μm). The distribution of sheath length in WT cells (shown in Fig. 1*B*) is reported in transparency for comparison (blue). The distribution of the sheath length is represented by the outer shape. The bold horizontal bar represents the median value (median = 0.93 μm and 0.76 μm for DivIVA-TssM and WT cells, respectively); the lower and upper boundaries of the internal box plot correspond to the 25th and 75th percentiles respectively; whiskers extend 1.5 times the interquartile range from the 25th and 75th percentiles. Outliers are shown as black dots. The number of measured sheaths ($n=75$) is indicated below. Statistical significance relative to WT cells is indicated above the plots (***, $p < 0.001$; one-tailed Wilcoxon's t -test). (*D*) Fluorescence microscopy time-lapse recordings of DivIVA-TssM cells producing TssB-sfGFP highlighting polar T6SS sheath assembly (white arrowhead) and contraction (blue arrowhead). Scale bar, 2 μm .

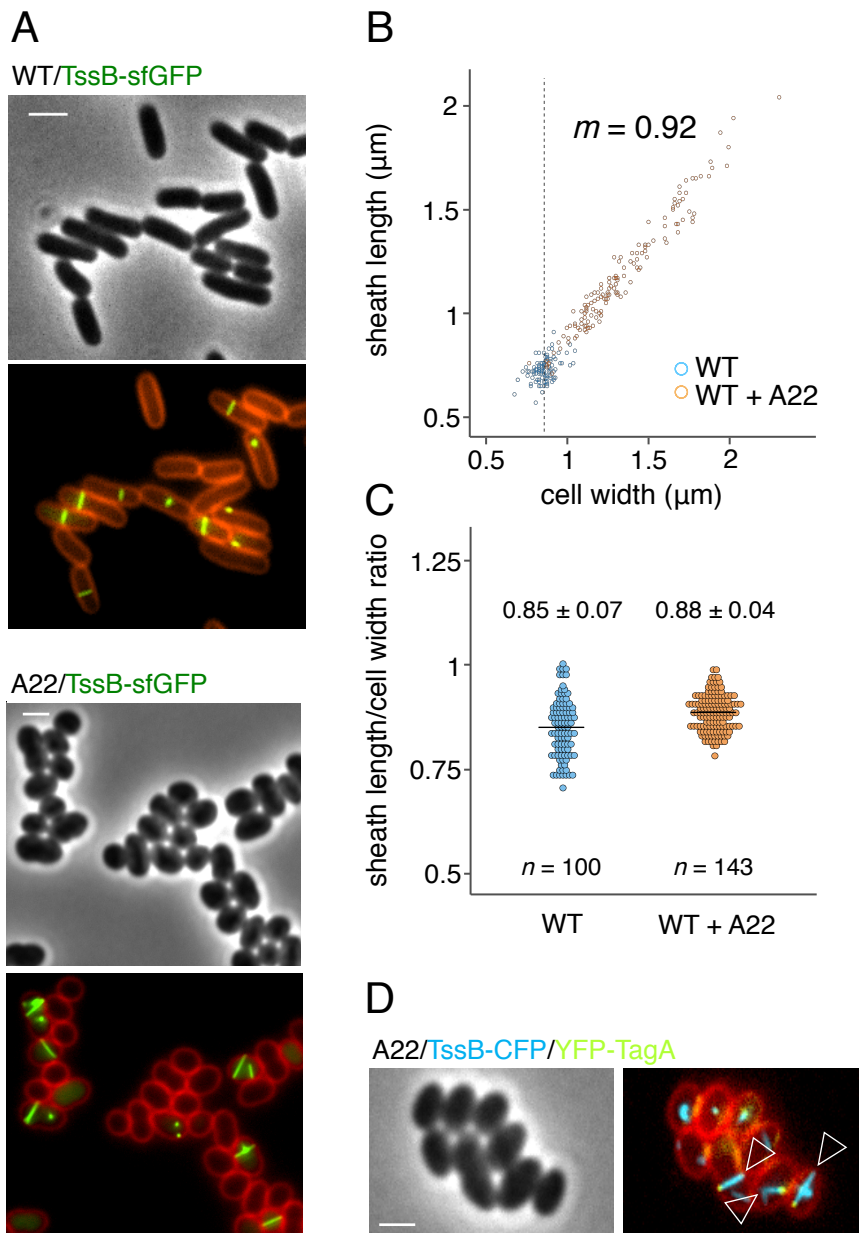


Fig. 4. Cell width dictates T6SS sheath length. (A) Representative fluorescence micrographs of EAEC cells producing TssB-sfGFP in absence (upper panel) or in presence of the MreB inhibitor A22 (lower panel), and labelled with FM4-64 (upper panel, phase channel; lower panel, merge of GFP and FM4-64 channels). Scale bar, 2 μm . (B) Plot representation showing the relationship between sheath length and cell width in absence (blue) and presence of A22 (orange). The dashed line represents the mean of the WT cell width (mean = 0.87 μm). Value of the slope (m) is indicated on right. Kendall's $\tau = 0.82$. (C) Dotplot of the ratios between sheath length and the width of the corresponding cell from cells grown in absence (blue) or presence of A22 (orange). Horizontal bars represent the mean in each condition. The values of the means and standard deviations are indicated above the plots. The number of analyzed cells (n) is indicated below. (D) Representative fluorescence micrograph of EAEC cells producing TssB-CFP and YFP-TagA in presence of the MreB inhibitor A22, and labelled with FM4-64 (left panel, phase channel; right panel, merge of CFP, YFP, and FM4-64 channels). The open arrowheads point T6SS extended sheaths in contact with the TagA stopper. Scale bar, 2 μm .

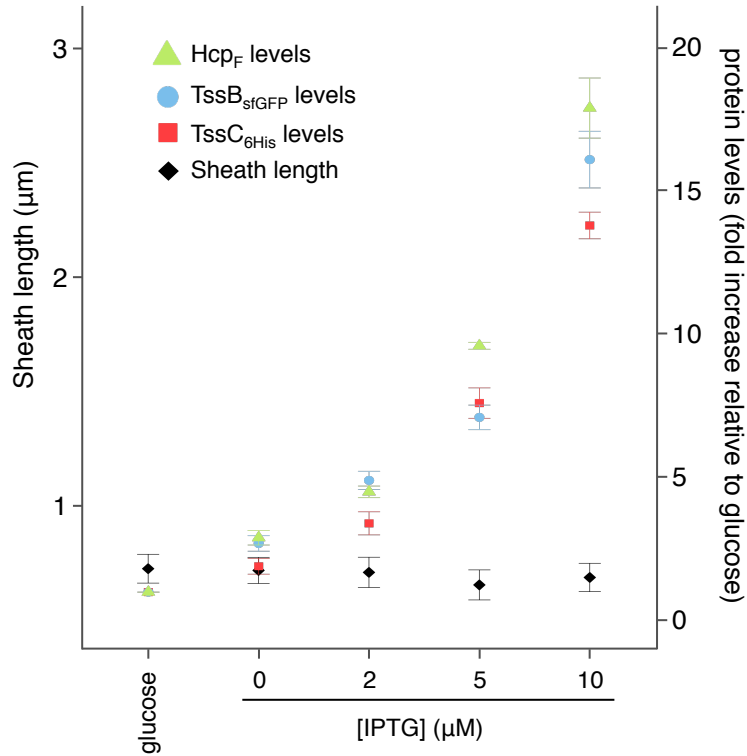


Fig. S1. T6SS tail tube/sheath subunits levels do not determine T6SS sheath length. Graph representation of the fold increase of Hcp_{FLAG} (green triangles), TssB-sfGFP (blue circles), and TssC_{6His} (red squares) cellular levels as a function of the IPTG concentration (relative to the glucose condition) from $\Delta tssBC\Delta hcp$ cells bearing plasmid pTrc-B_{GFP}-C_{6H}-Hcp_F. The corresponding sheath lengths are indicated with black diamonds. The mean and standard deviations from three independent experiments are shown.