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Bruno Theodoro Luciano, Anna Ayuso

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Bruno Theodoro Luciano¹

¹Université Libre de Bruxelles - ULB
Brussels, Belgium
(bruno.theodoro.luciano@ulb.be)

 ORCID ID:
orcid.org/0000-0002-1276-6076

Anna Ayuso²

²Barcelona Centre for International Affairs
- CIDOB
Barcelona, Catalunya, Spain
(aayuso@cidob.org)

 ORCID ID:
orcid.org/0000-0003-1301-851X

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EU-LAC inter-regionalism as a driver to achieve the environmental Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

This article assesses how environmental issues have been incorporated into the strategic association between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean. It analyses whether the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals are reflected in the EU-CELAC declarations, and what bi-regional programmes and projects have been developed in relation to the environmental SDGs. The analysis shows how the environment has become a key priority in both the political dialogue and development cooperation pillars, although it has only recently been included in the trade pillar, and in an incipient way.

Keywords: EU-LAC interregionalism; European Union; CELAC; Sustainable Development Goals; Environment; Climate Change.

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Introduction

International efforts for the governance of the challenges of climate change are a shared priority of the countries of the European Union (EU) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). The 2030 Agenda, which contains the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹ adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015, is a universal roadmap to move towards more inclusive and sustainable development models, both within each country and between different countries. This ambitious agenda was conceived to provide common responses to the challenges of an increasingly globalized and diverse world, which faces social fractures and climatic, demographic and productive challenges. One of the features that

¹ United Nations – UN. *The 17 Goals*. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

distinguishes the SDGs from the predecessors Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) is the increasing importance that has been given to environmental issues.

Over the past years, the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) bi-regional relationship has progressively incorporated these commitments in their cooperation relations since the Bi-Regional Strategic Partnership was launched in 1999, translating them into cooperation instruments. Previous literature has significantly explored several aspects of EU-LAC inter-regional relations, such as the commitment to shared global and domestic values, its longstanding, institutionalised and multitier characteristics (Dominguez 2015; Serbin and Pont 2018; Haider and Clemente 2020; Ayuso and Gratius 2021; Jeger et al. 2022), the EU Strategic Partnerships set out with Brazil, Mexico and Latin America as a region (Sanahuja 2015; Blanco and Luciano 2018; Meissner 2018; Ayuso 2021; Luciano 2021; Nolte 2023), and the EU agreements established and negotiated with LAC individual and subregional actors (Garcia 2015; Doctor 2015; Dominguez 2020; Bonilla and Sanahuja 2022).

However, there is a gap when it comes to understanding how the 2030 Agenda has been inserted at the EU-LAC interregional level. Therefore, in this article, the question to be analysed is: To what extent have environmental issues been discussed and applied in the bilateral strategic relationship between the EU and LAC? And more specifically, how are they reflected in the High-level declarations and what are the programs and projects that have been developed in relation to the SDGs specifically aimed at the objectives related to the planet and the fight against climate change? Instead of analysing the impact of sustainable development proposals or projects, the article focuses on the gradual inclusion of sustainability in the programmatic documents governing bi-regional cooperation and the projects approved, an aspect still unexplored in the overall literature on EU-LAC inter-regional relations.

The article is grounded in the qualitative analysis of primary sources, including the documents signed in the context of EU-LAC (1999-2012) and EU-CELAC (2013-2023) Summits as well as the key EU cooperation programmes and agreements signed by the EU with Latin American actors over the past years related to sustainable development. The analysis of the contents of these three different types of instruments allows us to identify the incorporation of the environmental SDGs in the three pillars (Gonzalez Sarro, 2020) of the strategic relationship, political dialogue, development cooperation and trade and compare whether progress has been made.

Therefore, the period of analysis begins in 1999 when the EU-LAC bi-regional Strategic Association was launched at the Rio Summit, but above all it will focus on its development from the first EU-CELAC summit in 2013, after the creation of CELAC. Special attention is paid to the period between 2015 when the SDGs were approved and the second EU-CELAC Summit was held in Brussels until the next Summit held in July 2023, also in Brussels, in which, after eight years, the high-level presidential meetings were reactivated. Although the analysis period begins before the approval of the SDGs in 2015, the contents of the documents have been classified based on the topics that have been incorporated into each of the SDGs focused on environmental issues. This allows us, not only to develop a diachronic comparison, but also to observe to what extent the approval of the SDGs has had an influence on the incorporation of

new areas in interregional cooperation. This comparison also allows us to analyse the degree of coherence between the programmatic documents and the instruments that have been developed to incorporate political commitments.

After this brief introduction, the second section analyses the documents that emerged from the political dialogue during the summits. After a brief review of the background, we focus on the current state of the debate on environmental commitments in both regions. In the third section we will focus on the implementation of the programmatic documents and the main projects carried out, as well as the introduction of environmental issues in the new association agreements. The fourth section analyses the debates and agreements reached at the July 2023 Summit during the Spanish presidency of the council and future prospects in the current context of the energy crisis. We end with some brief conclusions on the challenges and opportunities for greater and better cooperation in environmental SDGs between bi-regional relations.

The analyses focus on the three SDGs 13, 14, and 15 that directly address the challenges towards the protection of our planet and that the United Nations groups in the Planet axis². However, given the proximity of these three SDGs and the importance for bi-regional relations, the analysis of SDG 7 on sustainable energy is incorporated. According to the aforementioned SDGs, the topics analysed are:

Table 1. SDGs analysed

SDG 13: Action to combat Climate Change and its Impact	<p>13.1 Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related risks and natural disasters.</p> <p>13.2 Incorporate climate change measures into national policies.</p> <p>13.3 Improve education and human and institutional capacity regarding climate change mitigation.</p>
SDG 14: Life underwater	<p>14.1 Reduce marine pollution particularly that produced by activities carried out on land.</p> <p>14.2 Protect marine and coastal ecosystems and restore the health and productivity of the oceans.</p> <p>14.3 Minimize the effects of ocean acidification.</p> <p>14.4 Regulate fishing exploitation and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.</p> <p>14.5 Conserve at least 10% of coastal and marine areas.</p> <p>14.6 Prohibit certain fisheries subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing.</p> <p>14.7 Increase the economic benefits that small island developing States and least developed countries derive from the sustainable use of marine resources.</p>

Continue

² <https://www.sdgforall.net/index.php/goal-13-14-15>

Continuation

	15.1 Conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems.
	15.2 Sustainable management of all types of forests, put an end to deforestation, recover degraded forests and increase reforestation.
	15.3 Combat desertification, rehabilitate degraded lands and soils.
	15.4 Conservation of mountain ecosystems to provide essential benefits for sustainable development.
SDG 15: Life on land ecosystems	15.5 Reduce the degradation of natural habitats and protect threatened species.
	15.6 Fair sharing of benefits from the utilization of genetic resources.
	15.7 End poaching and trafficking of protected species of flora and fauna.
	15.8 Prevent the introduction of invasive alien species.
	15.9 Integrate the values of ecosystems and biological diversity in national and local planning.
SDG 7: access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.	7.1 Guarantee universal access to affordable, reliable, and modern energy services.
	7.2 Significantly increase the share of renewable energy in the mix of energy sources.
	7.3 Double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency.

Background Environmental Goals and EU-LAC interregionalism

Inclusion of Environmental themes before EU-CELAC Summits

The first bi-regional declarations in the context of establishing the EU-LAC Strategic Partnership already referred to the areas of sustainable development, climate change and biodiversity, even before the UN Sustainable Development Goals were established. However, these topics were often spread out in the political, economic or multilateral sections of the first High-Level Declarations. For instance, the Rio de Janeiro EU-LAC Declaration of 1999 in the section on the political domain referred to the need for joint efforts to promote strategies of development that reconcile economic growth, protection of the environment and social progress. Moreover, the Rio Declaration states the priority from both sides of the Atlantic to the promotion of durable development, changing modes of production and consumption, and encouragement of the conservation of biodiversity, prevention of the degradation of the environment, destruction of the soils and forests and several other threats that affect the planet³.

³ European Union-Latin America and Caribbean Foundation – EU-CELAC. *Sommet Union Européenne – Amérique Latine et Caraïbes*, Rio de Janeiro, 1999.

In the 2002 Madrid Declaration, mentions of environmental topics are seen in the part of the document that deals with the economic field, which for the first time at the bi-regional level highlighted that ‘Sustainable development can only be achieved when all its pillars are addressed: economic development, environmental protection and social development’⁴ (EU-LAC 2002, 15). On the other side, the Guadalajara EU-LAC declaration of 2004 mainly addressed the environmental agenda within the section on Multilateralism, in which leaders of the two regions referred to their common commitments to global conventions established at the United Nations levels, such as the UN Convention on Climate Change - particularly to the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol -, the international conventions from the International Maritime Organization, the UN General Assembly Resolution 54/225, that developed the concept of the Caribbean Sea as an Area of Special Importance in the context of sustainable development, and the Seventh Meeting of the Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

It is only in the Vienna Declaration of 2006 that EU-LAC leaders introduced a section exclusively dedicated to the environment, in which representatives of both regions gathered in Austria stated that ‘Special attention will be given to cooperation in areas such as climate change, desertification, energy, water, biodiversity, forests and chemical management’⁵. However, the EU-LAC bi-regional meeting of 2008 in Lima was the one that most significantly discussed the environmental and sustainable development agenda. EU and LAC countries share the position that ‘We are committed to foster bi-regional cooperation with a comprehensive vision of the environment, particularly focused on climate change, desertification, energy, water, biodiversity, forests, fisheries and the handling of chemical products’⁶. In this respect, the Lima Declaration contained a section entitled ‘Sustainable Development: environment, climate change, energy’, divided into three types of actions to be taken by the leadership of both regions: a) the promotion of Bi-Regional Cooperation on Climate Change; b) fostering environmental sustainability; and c) the implementation of the Lima Agenda for Sustainable Development: Environment; Climate Change; Energy. Since then, the Lima Agenda on Sustainable Development would become a key axis of the EU-LAC bi-regional agenda for the following years and remain so with the establishment of EU-CELAC Summits in 2013.

In addition, and in more concrete terms, EU-LAC leaders also agreed in Lima on the establishment of a joint environment programme ‘EUroCLIMA’, which was ‘launched to the benefit of Latin American countries with the main objectives of knowledge sharing, fostering structured and regular dialogue at all levels and ensuring synergies and coordination of current and future actions in this field’⁵. Subsequently, the 2010 EU-LAC Madrid meeting took stock of the

⁴ European Union-Latin America and Caribbean Foundation – EU-CELAC. *Political Declaration: The Madrid Commitment, European Union – Latin America and Caribbean Summit*, Madrid, May 17, 2002.

⁵ European Union-Latin America and Caribbean Foundation – EU-CELAC. *Declaration of Vienna, IV EU-LAC Summit, Vienna, Austria, May 12, 2006.*

⁶ European Union-Latin America and Caribbean Foundation – EU-CELAC. *Lima Declaration, V Latin America and Caribbean-European Union Summit*. Lima, May 16, 2008.

proposals from Lima, referring to the creation of an EU-LAC Dialogue on Climate Change and Environment, which was grounded on the commitments previously established with the “Lima Agenda for Sustainable Development: Environment; Climate Change; Energy”.

Analysis of previous EU-CELAC meetings and SDGs

Since the creation of CELAC in 2011 and the first EU-CELAC Summits in 2013 and 2015, both regions aimed to upgrade inter-regional relations by setting up Action Plans to translate shared commitments into more tangible dialogues, activities, and initiatives. The first bi-regional plans were established in the context of the UN Development Agenda, which would ultimately lead to the adoption of the SDGs in 2015. In fact, the EU-CELAC Santiago Declaration of 2013 once again referred to the three dimensions of sustainable development, to the protection of biodiversity, but at the same time stressed ‘the sovereign right of States over their own natural resources and their responsibility to preserve the environment, in accordance with national and international law and principles and in line with the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), held in Rio de Janeiro, 20-22 June 2012’⁷, indicating its common expectation on the elaboration of the UN SDGs.

In the context of the approval of the 2015 Development Agenda, EU and CELAC leaders gathered in Brussels stressed their ‘commitment to adopt an ambitious, universal and transformative post-2015 development agenda that ensures no one is left behind’⁸. Additionally, EU and LAC leaders also took the opportunity to voice their recognition of the diversity of approaches and asymmetric responsibilities of countries from the two regions in the context of fighting climate change and the loss of biodiversity. On the one hand, the Brussels declaration recognised that countries have developed diverse experiences of sustainable development and of how to conciliate economic, social and environmental needs, highlighting the Latin American approaches to the Mother Earth as an expression of several countries in the region. On the other hand, it also restated the asymmetric capacities of EU-LAC countries to address these environmental challenges by recognising the principle adopted in the UNFCCC context of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.

Despite the first EU-CELAC references to the UN Development Agenda, the suspension of EU-CELAC Summits since 2015 meant that the two regions were not able to issue new High-Level political declarations and action plans since the full adoption of the UN Development Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. Nonetheless, examining with detail the content of the 2013 and 2015 EU-CELAC Action Plans can to some extent contribute to understanding the key areas and actions promoted by both regions to address the Sustainable Development agenda even before the official establishment of the SDGs.

⁷ European Union-Latin America and Caribbean Foundation – EU-CELAC. *Santiago declaration*. Santiago de Chile, 2013.

⁸ European Union-Latin America and Caribbean Foundation – EU-CELAC. *Brussels declaration. EU-CELAC Summit*. Brussels, 2015.

For instance, the first version of the EU-CELAC Action Plan from 2013 listed ‘Sustainable development; environment; climate change; biodiversity; energy’ – clearly referring back to the terms of the Lima Agenda with the inclusion of biodiversity – as the second among the eight central areas stipulated for EU-CELAC activities agenda. More specifically, within the area of Sustainable Development, eight objectives are proposed at the inter-regional level, without avoiding referring to the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, listed in Table 2:

Table 2. EU-CELAC Sustainable Development objectives and connected SDGs

EU-CELAC Action Plan Objectives	Connected SDGs
i) to promote the sustainable development of all countries and to support the achievement of the MDG and the other international agreements on these issues;	17
ii) to ensure the effective implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol, recognizing the scientific views regarding the limit for the increase in the global temperature;	13
iii) to develop policies and instruments for adaptation and mitigation, to address the adverse effects of climate change and enhance long-term cooperation initiatives and to reduce the vulnerability to natural disasters;	13
iv) to support activities oriented to reduce intensity of greenhouse gas emissions in consumption and production activities in our countries, according to existing international commitments;	13
v) to facilitate access to and exchange of information related to best environmental practices and technologies;	13
vi) to ensure and support the full implementation of the three objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity;	14 and 15
vii) to improve energy efficiency and saving as well as accessibility;	7
viii) to develop and to deploy renewable energies and to promote energy interconnection networks, ensuring the diversification and complementarity of the energy matrix.	7

Source: elaborated by the authors, based on the EU-CELAC Action Plan⁹.

In practice, some of the objectives proposed directly responded to not only the previous Millennium Development Goals, particularly MDG 7 (ensure environmental sustainability), but also speak to certain SDGs, such as objectives two, three, four (SDG 13), six (SDGs 14 and 15), seven and eight (SDG 7).

Regarding the work programme, the EU-CELAC Action Plan introduced one mechanism of dialogue, six cooperation activities and initiatives, and four expected results. The instrument of dialogue mainly recovered the Lima Agenda (Sustainable Development; Environment; Climate Change; Energy) with the inclusion of Biodiversity, which in practice encompassed all four SDGs of the analysis. Concerning the six activities/initiatives indicated in the Action Plan, half of them

⁹ European Union-Latin America and Caribbean Foundation – EU-CELAC. *EU-CELAC action plan 2013-2015*. Santiago de Chile, 2013.

referred to SDGs 13, 14 and 15, with particular attention to the issues involving climate change, biodiversity, deforestation, and forest degradation, while two have focused on renewable energies (SDG 7). The key initiative highlighted by the EU-CELAC Action Plan on the area is precisely EUroCLIMA, although some generic mention is made of South-South Cooperation as exchange channels for the development of mitigation and adaptation strategies. Finally, on the expected results, while two of them (h and j) addressed SDGs 13, 14 and 15, the last one (k) focused more directly on the issue of renewable energies and energy efficiency (SDG 7).

Regional programmes and projects related to the environmental SDGs and the Association Agreements

The Declarations and action plans of the Summits are later translated into EU programmatic documents and other cooperation instruments through which the negotiated priorities are specified. The EU regional programming document is the Regional Multiannual Indicative Plan (MIP) which is periodically renewed in each planning cycle and establishes the framework where the projects are framed. These documents are adopted by the EU through an internal procedure, although they are based on the agreements adopted at the Summits. The fact that these were interrupted for eight years since 2015 did not prevent new topics related to the SDGs from being incorporated that arose from bi-regional sectoral meetings that were not interrupted. In addition, environmental issues have also been introduced in the new association agreements recently negotiated.

Priorities of the regional indicative plans

The regional MIP for Latin America 2014-2020 prepared by the European Commission (EC) placed special emphasis on social and environmental aspects. With the cooperation in environmental sustainability and climate change, the aim was to reduce the poverty of the most vulnerable populations, through the promotion of sustainable environmental development and the improvement of the capacity to face climate change and associated catastrophes. The EU-CARIFORUM 2014-2019 Regional Indicative Plan placed even more emphasis on cooperation in the field of the environment, climate change, disaster prevention and sustainable energy since it is, together with Central America, a region especially vulnerable and energetically dependent. Also, the Regional Program for Central America 2014-2020, complementary to the Regional Program for Latin America, made climate change and disaster management one of the three pillars of the regional program, placing special emphasis on improving environmental governance and the full incorporation of the environment in planning in the short, medium and long term.

In 2019, the EC sent a joint communication to the Parliament and the Council entitled “The EU and LAC: Joining forces for a Common future” in which the challenges of the 2030 Agenda were incorporated, establishing four pillars of priorities: Prosperity, Democracy, Resilience and

Effective Global Governance. In the Prosperity pillar, the objective is to move towards a Green economy, the promotion of the blue economy and the transition towards a circular economy, all of them related to SDGs 14 and 15. The Resilience pillar incorporates the fight against climate change and environmental conservation (SDG 13) and the Effective Global Governance pillar aims to Strengthen multilateralism in climate and environmental matters, strengthen the Governance of the Oceans by the effective implementation of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea and apply the 2030 Agenda as a whole (SDGs 13, 14, 15 and 7).

The last Joint Communication of the EU was issued on 7th June 2023 entitled “A New Agenda for Relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean” just a few weeks before the EU-CELAC Summit, and proposed a set of priorities and actions in three key areas. One is to build inclusive and sustainable societies, based on a joint commitment to the 2030 Agenda and “together lead a fair green and digital transition, including by rolling out the Global Gateway investment strategy.” To cooperate for a *fair green transition* the EU proposed to increase the cooperation on policies and regulatory frameworks, through the implementation of trade agreements, promoting relations with regional organisations and engaging with LAC partners on the impact of its legislation and instruments implementing the European Green Deal (SDG 13 and SDG 7). The proposed key actions were: the implementation of green investment projects as part of the Global Gateway investment agenda (SDG 7); fight against forest and biodiversity loss and forest degradation, in particular in the Amazon and the Five Great Forests of Mesoamerica (SDG 15); explore mutually beneficial partnerships as envisaged under the EU’s new Critical Raw Materials strategy (SDG 15); explore the establishment of a dialogue on energy transition and step up bilateral dialogues on climate, environment and energy (SDG 7 and 13); cooperation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity (SDG 13); attract investors and support the transition to a low carbon economy (SDG 7); Advance cooperation on circular economy (SDG 13); actions in favour of green energy transition, including renewable hydrogen (SDG 7); cooperation on disaster preparedness and disaster risk management (SDG 13); cooperation on early warning and monitoring systems for forest degradation/deforestation and wildfires (SDG 15).

The “Americas and the Caribbean Regional Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021-2027”¹⁰ developed these priorities and is expressly committed to the SDGs in the context of the post-COVID-19 recovery and the green and digital transitions. The document includes several windows: The Pan American; The Central American; and the Caribbean with specific priorities. The first priority area for the Pan-American window is the Green Transition. The EU will support LAC countries to; i) take action against climate change (SDG 13); ii) address biodiversity loss (SDG 14 and 15); iii) advance the transition to a clean, resource-efficient circular economy (SDG 7). The specific objectives of this priority area include:

¹⁰ https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/mip-2021-c2021-9356-americas-caribbean-annex_en.pdf

Table 3. Pan-America priority on Green transition.

Specific Objectives	Expected results	SDG
O1- Climate Action and just energy transition	Effective climate national policies and climate Plans.	SGD13
	Comprehensive climate change adaptation and risk plans strategies	SGD13
	Sustainable transport, disaster risk, water management and food production.	SDG 13 and 15
	Increase the share of renewable energy and energy efficiency.	SDG7
	Strengthened monitoring of climate policies implementation.	SDG13
O2- Biodiversity, marine and forest conservation	Policies for the protection and sustainable use of natural resources	SDG 14 and 15
	Enforcement of forest protection legislation and protect forest, coastal, marine and river basins.	SDG 14 and 15
	Forest management capacity and deforestation-free supply chains	SDG 15
	Knowledge of biodiversity and ecosystem services and improve best practices	SDG 14 and 15
O3- Tackle pollution and transition to a clean, resource efficient and circular economy	Strengthen regional and subregional dialogue.	SDG13
	Finance circular economy approaches and green business model.	SDG 14 and 15
	Regional value chains for sustainable raw materials, including blue economy	SDG 14 and 15
	Improve traceability and sustainable production using digital data.	SDG 14 and 15

The second priority is digital transformation and although some sustainability criteria are included, it is so related to the Planet/Environmental SDGs. On the other hand, the third priority, Sustainable and inclusive economy, contains the need to introduce sustainability in aspects related to trade, agriculture, and the promotion of green, blue and circular economies, although without introducing new topics.

The window for Central America also contains as a first priority the Green and Blue Recovery¹¹ with important impact on the planet's SDGs. The specific objective for this subregion is to increase the resilience of the livelihoods and Ecosystems and the expected results are: 1) Improve management of land and marine ecosystems with the participation of civil society (SDG 14 and 15) and; 2) More resilient agro-food systems to facilitate green and Blue recovery (SGD 14 and 15).

¹¹ In the words of the World Bank (2020, 1), 'As we work with countries to build back their economies and strengthen their communities, it cannot be business as usual and sustainability needs to be fully built into the recovery. But building back better should go beyond the green recovery that is being spoken about and embrace a "Blue Recovery"'. In this sense, economic stimulus packages should also consider their potential impacts on the coastal zones, marine litter, overfishing and coral reef and biodiversity loss.

The Caribbean window also includes as a priority the partnership for a Green Deal with two elements: 1) Climate Change resilience and 2) Inclusive green transition. Regarding the first, the results expected are; better protection of infrastructures (SDG13) and; regional strategies for Disaster risk management. The results expected for the inclusive green transition are promoting a circular economy (SDG14 and 15) and increased energy efficiency and share of renewable energy production (SDG7).

The MIP contains other specific priorities for Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Uruguay, Panama and Costa Rica in which the same objectives are repeated with slight specificities, with emphasis on the Green recovery and the EU Green Deal Initiative. A section of MIP is dedicated to the Team Europe Initiatives TIA, which also incorporates Green transition actions as a priority area, restructured into three pillars: 1) Climate policies including just and clean transition (SDG 13 and 7); 2) Biodiversity, marine and forest conservation (SDG14 and 15) and; 3) Circular economy (SDG14 and 15). The MIP also contains a table with indicators for monitoring results, although it is not specified to what extent they correspond to the SDG indicators. In the evolution of programmatic documents, there is increasing attention to aspects related to the environment. In the last MIP, the effort to link priorities with the SDGs was also maintained. However, it is not done in a systematic way, and different objectives and results often overlap.

The bi-regional Projects

The growing interest in the environment observed in summit declarations and documents is also reflected in the increase in regional projects. The Evaluation of the European Union's regional development cooperation with Latin America (2009-2017) (Caputo et al 2022) reflects this increase in projects in recent years and the consolidation of the main initiatives. In 2007 only a small regional program EUROSOLAR was underway. In 2010, after the Lima Summit, what has been the main regional program, EUROCLIMA, was launched, which has been developed between phases (2010-2014), (2014-2017) and (2016-2021). During this period, the Latin America Investment Facility (LAIF) project (2010-2025)¹² was also launched. RALCEA was also a program developed between 2010 and 2015 and WATERCLIMA was developed between 2014 and 2018.

Euroclima¹³ is still the main regional program on climate action and became part of the Global Gateway strategy for the LAC countries. Currently the six lines of action are aligned with the Paris Agreement on Climate Change but also with the Planet/Environmental SDG. The first line is to strengthen national institutions, plans and policies to achieve climate change targets, this includes also to promote regional cooperation on electricity mobility. The second line is enabling institutional capacities and instruments for financing national climate change policies.

¹² <https://www.eib.org/en/products/mandates-partnerships/laif/index.htm>

¹³ <https://www.euroclima.org/en/>

The third is to improve transparency and accountability for climate policy including the design of data collection processes, The fourth is to improve the coordination among sectors, different levels of government and multiple actors. Five is strengthening climate change education and participation aligned with the Action for Climate Empowering (ACE), a proposal of public policies to promote transformative actions against climate change. Six is the integration of the gender perspective and participation of vulnerable groups, indigenous and local communities in policies and plans for climate change objectives. The main focus of this program is SDG 13 but some projects are linked to SDG 7 (energy efficiency and renewables) and SDG 15 (protection of the Amazon rainforest).

RALCEA was the Latin American Network of Knowledge in centres in the water sector whose objective was to contribute to the strengthening of water management and, therefore, directly linked to SDG 14. Now is a group integrated into the Aquaknow program funded by DG DEVCO and aims to contribute to the improvement of decision-making at a political and technical level by providing better knowledge about water resources in the region. Also directly linked to SDG 14, the purpose of the WaterClima – LAC¹⁴ program was to contribute to the improvement of environmental governance and management of coastal zones. The project contributed to increasing resilience to climate change in LAC countries.

The protection of the Amazon rainforest has also been the subject of different initiatives (Ayuso 2022). Under the TEAM Europe Initiatives, the Amazon Basin Project aims to improve the capacity of the Amazon Basin countries to mitigate CO₂ emissions and adapt to the effects of climate change, and to stop deforestation and improve biodiversity protection, so it fits under the SDG 15 objectives. The EU REDD Facility (Reducing deforestation through improved -land-use governance) is a global action, but also works with Latin American countries as Colombia and Ecuador, helping countries to implement their targets under the Paris Agreement on climate change, so contributing to both SDG 13 and SDG 15.

The energy transition has become one of the pillars of cooperation between the EU and LAC and the cooperation programs seek to create synergies with existing initiatives in the region. In addition to the aforementioned Euroclima, there are other tools for cooperation such as the new Global Europe instrument, the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (FEEDS+) and the Global Gateway initiative, which aim to boost European investment in sustainable infrastructure and regulatory convergence (Escribano and Urbasos, 2023). Other financial instruments are the European Investment Bank (EIB) which funds the EU Caribbean Investment Facility and the Latin America Investment Facility¹⁵ to support development projects including Energy as one of the priority sectors. The EIB has been in charge of mobilising resources for electrical infrastructure projects. One of the main lines of work is climate change

¹⁴ <https://communicationpackage.com/portfolio/europeaid-water-clima-lac/?cookie-state-change=1694416514321>

¹⁵ <https://www.eib.org/en/products/mandates-partnerships/laif/index.htm>

mitigation and adaptation¹⁶. One important regional project is ENEL energy efficiency & renewables FL (LATAM)¹⁷, a project that is expected to contribute to the achievement of SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy) and 13 (climate action). The EIB also finances the LATAM Energy Efficient Housing Fund¹⁸ to improve the standards of energy consumption in the health and education sectors. Together with the Caribbean Development Bank and as part of the Global Energy Transformation Program (GET.pro)¹⁹, the EU created GET.transform which provides energy policy advisory. Latin America Get.transform supports regional and national institutions in identifying knowledge gaps along energy and climate planning processes, and offers capacity building and analytical support through training, dialogues and knowledge products, so it contributes to both SDG 7 and 13. These two goals are also the objective of the Technical Assistance Program for Sustainable Energy in the Caribbean²⁰ a Program funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the EU to provide technical and financial assistance to regional institutions committed toward low-carbon climate-compatible energy sustainability. In 2018 the EU launched the Green Fund initiative for the Central American Integration System that includes the Initiative ‘Green Small and Medium Enterprises II’ to promote programs aimed at the generation of renewable energy and the adoption of energy efficiency measures in micro, small and medium-sized companies, as well as to improve resilience to climate change in vulnerable area.

All of these are regional initiatives that are complemented by other national projects of different types. The increase in the programs in recent years shows a growing interest in environmental issues, but it lacks an integral strategy that gives them coherence. However, the Global Gateway and the Team Europe approach can contribute to a more integrated vision if they are aligned with bi-regional priorities (Ayuso 2023a).

The Association Agreements

In addition to political dialogue through cooperation and international cooperation, the strategic partnership has commercial pillars as one of its pillars. This has been developed through association agreements. The renegotiation of the agreements with Mexico and Chile, as well as the pending agreement with MERCOSUR, have increasingly incorporated environmental issues that have become one of the most controversial aspects (Ayuso 2023b).

The introduction of a chapter on the environment related to trade is one of the new features of the three association agreements. The three agreements contain a very similar chapter

¹⁶ <https://www.eib.org/en/about/priorities/climate-action/index.htm>

¹⁷ <https://www.eib.org/en/projects/pipelines/all/20200823>

¹⁸ <https://www.eib.org/en/projects/pipelines/all/20200881>

¹⁹ <https://www.global-energy-transformation.eu/>

²⁰ <https://caricom.org/tag/tapsec/>

on trade and sustainable development with a long statement of agreements that includes the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEP), the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the Framework Convention of the United Nations on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement, the Convention on Biological Biodiversity (CBB), the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) or the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. Regarding all of them, the parties reaffirm their commitments, as well as to cooperate and share information. The agreements recognize the right to regulate their sustainable development policies to improve effectiveness and contain the express principle that “in no case” may environmental legislation be weakened to favour trade and investment. The commitment to all these agreements contributes to SDG 13, but also SDG 15.

All three treaties have a specific section on sustainable forest management and the need for measures to prevent illegal logging and commit to the exchange of information (SDG 15). The same is done with the sustainable management of fisheries and aquaculture, with the three agreements incorporating the principles of the FAO code of conduct for responsible fishing and committing to participate in regional fisheries management organisations. The agreements between Mexico and Chile also mention the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), compliance with international measures for the conservation and management of fishing vessels on the high seas and the agreement on measures of the governing state. of the port aimed at preventing, discouraging and eliminating illegal fishing (SDG 14).

A difference between the agreements of Mexico and Chile with respect to that of Mercosur is that the first two have a chapter dedicated to energy and raw materials. Although most of the provisions refer to market access and regulatory issues, a provision is incorporated in both regarding technical cooperation and in the case of the Chile agreement, express reference is made to the energy transition (SDG 7). In the case of the agreement with Mercosur, there is no provision in this regard.

The Return of EU-CELAC Relations in 2022-2023: New Developments and the July 2023 Summit

The reactivation of CELAC in 2021 with the activities led by the Mexican Pro-Tempore Presidency created high expectations regarding the return of high-level meetings between CELAC and the EU. Since then, the EU and CELAC actors have resumed their political engagements, as seen with the presence of President of the European Council Charles Michel in the CELAC Summit organised in Mexico City in September 2021, the last CELAC high-level event since 2017. With the beginning of the CELAC Rotating Presidency in Argentina, the EU and CELAC started to materialise the resume of EU-CELAC Summits. The presence of both President Charles Michel and EU High Representative Josep Borrell in the CELAC meetings in Buenos Aires pointed in

that direction, with the environmental SDGs being included as the main topics addressed by EU and CELAC representatives. Besides discussing the preparations for the return of the EU-CELAC Summit in 2023, the Joint Communiqué issued in the context of the 3rd EU-CELAC Foreign Ministers Meeting on October 27th 2022 in Buenos Aires reflected the concern of both sides to discuss key aspects within the environmental SDGs:

Ministers exchanged views on innovation, the fight against climate change and biodiversity loss, disaster risk management and the digital agenda. They considered the financing of climate change adaptation and mitigation measures, the transition towards a circular economy, protection of the oceans, and how scientific innovation can support development.²¹

In the same context, EU and CELAC foreign ministers agreed on a bi-regional Road Map for 2022-2023, entitled ‘Renewing the bi-regional partnership to strengthen peace and sustainable development’, which included activities directly linked to the SDGs analysed, particularly on energy and climate change, such as the EU-Latin American Convention on Raw Materials; the Bi-regional meeting on energy cooperation within the framework of Argentina’s Mining Industry Meeting 2023; the Working Meeting of the Bi-regional Network of Women in three prioritized areas (climate actions, care, leadership); the EU-CELAC Working Meeting on the CELAC Fund for Climate Adaptation and Comprehensive Disaster Response; and a High-level meeting on Environment and Climate Change²².

In July 2023 the EU and CELAC finally resumed the bi-regional high-level events with an official Summit in Brussels. The 2023 EU-CELAC Declaration signed in this context is unprecedented in terms of giving centrality to the Sustainable Development Agenda and SDGs, with seven explicit references to the terms Sustainable Development and SDG and a single item giving full attention to the 2030 Agenda:

We commit to strengthening our biregional cooperation for the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda and will join forces to support the UN Secretary General in his efforts to reinvigorate multilateralism and ensure an effective and accelerated implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We will work to enhance cooperation and coordination, in relevant multilateral fora on issues of common interest, including human rights, labour rights, climate change and biodiversity loss, food and energy security, addressing and countering the world drug problem and organised crime, migration, health, digitalisation and taxation.²³

²¹ European Union-Latin America and Caribbean Foundation – EU-CELAC. *Co-Chairs’ Communiqué (press release) CELAC–EU 3rd Foreign Ministers Meeting*, Buenos Aires, Argentina, October 27, 2022.

²² European Union-Latin America and Caribbean Foundation – EU-CELAC. *Bi-Regional Roadmap 2022 – 2023: “Renewing the bi-regional partnership to strengthen peace and sustainable development”*, III CELAC-UE Ministerial Meeting, Buenos Aires, 2022.

²³ European Union-Latin America and Caribbean Foundation – EU-CELAC. *Declaration of the EU-CELAC Summit*. Brussels, July 18, 2023.

15 of the 41 items of the Declaration directly refer to the environmental SDGs, besides including 7 direct mentions of climate (change, finance or vulnerability), 5 mentions of environment, 2 mentions of biodiversity, and 5 mentions of energy (security, efficiency, production or supply chains).

Clean and affordable energy (SDG 7) was a goal discussed across different parts of the 2023 EU-CELAC Declaration. EU and LAC countries ‘agree to promote the acceleration of the deployment of renewable energies and the increase of energy efficiency’ (EU-CELAC 2023, 7) and concurred that ‘investment and cooperation with the aim of achieving closer integration in clean energy supply chains, including critical raw materials and technology transfer, would make a significant contribution to the SDG’ (p. 8). In that sense, the Declaration cites the EU-LAC Global Gateway Investment Agenda as a concrete instrument to contribute to the sustainable development of both regions in several aspects, including energy production.

Climate action (SDG 13) is undoubtedly the environmental SDG most referred to in the Brussels Declaration. Following references made in previous EU-CELAC Actions Plans, the political declaration cited the common need to mitigate the effects of climate change by taking into account the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, besides considering how climate change has impacted nations differently, especially developing and small island states. In that respect, developed countries showed their commitment within the EU-CELAC declaration to financing developing countries in tackling climate change, by mobilising USD 100 billion per year to double adaptation finance by 2025²³.

An interesting point to be made is the prominent role of SDG 14 (life below water), with three items of the Declarations explicitly mentioning the issue, with reference to the High Seas Treaty, UN Ocean Conferences, and the Caribbean’s significant vulnerabilities in this respect, which indicates that the demands from the Caribbean countries – led by the Prime Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (Rotating President of CELAC) – were incorporated into the Summit Declaration. Regarding the concerns with SDG 15 (life on land), the 2023 EU-CELAC declaration resumed the commitments made in previous declarations to support the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Conclusions

This article aimed to assess how the 2030 Agenda and specifically the environmental SDGs have been incorporated into the EU-LAC interregional relations. While scholarly literature on EU-LAC relations has mainly addressed the commercial and political dimensions of EU Strategic Partnerships and Agreements with the LAC region, this article contributes to shedding light on how environmental issues and the SDGs agenda have become a key pillar of these inter-regional relations.

Firstly, it highlighted how EU-LAC high-level declarations have successively incorporated environmental concerns at the bi-regional level. Since the Rio Summit of 1999 until the most recent EU-CELAC meetings, environmental issues have become an increased presence in the final declarations of those meetings. Nonetheless, the 2008 Lima Declaration has inserted the sustainable development agenda into the core of EU-LAC relations, not only by dedicating an entire section of the final declaration on the topic but also with the launch of Project EUROCLIMA. Later on, the creation of CELAC and the setup of EU-CELAC Action Plans followed the objectives of the Lima Declaration and addressed several SDGs highlighted in this article.

The objectives stipulated within EU-CELAC declarations and action plans have been translated over time into bi-regional Programmes and Agreements between the EU and LAC actors. The June 2023 communication on the new EU LAC agenda puts cooperation for the just green transition at the forefront and incorporates it into the Global Gateway investment strategy, unlike in the declaration of the last summit the SGD 14 is underrepresented, which shows that the CELAC rotatory presidency of St. Vincent and the Grenadines had an impact on the greater presence of a topic that is of particular concern to the Caribbean. On the other hand, the multi-annual program 2021-2027 does incorporate the four Planet/Environmental SDGs in a more balanced way.

Programs aimed at environmental issues have also multiplied in the last decade and EUROCLIMA has established itself as the flagship project. With the Global Gateway initiative and the Team Europe approach, an attempt is being made to give more coherence to a set of programs that were launched in a fragmented way, but an effort still needs to be made to give them greater coherence and complementarity.

The incorporation of environmental issues into association agreements is a step forward in ensuring that sustainability is a cross-cutting issue present in the three pillars of association, political dialogue, trade and cooperation, and should serve to advance the coherence of policies.

More recently, the resume of EU-CELAC meetings in the context of the revitalisation of CELAC and the 2023 EU Spanish Presidency have demonstrated that SDGs, especially the environmental ones, have become a central pillar of EU-LAC interregional relations. Several parts of the final EU-CELAC declaration have referred to all SDGs explored in this investigation, especially regarding Climate Action, but also other SDGs not fully emphasized before, such as Life below Sea, mostly due to Caribbean demands. However, the difficulties in ratifying the EU-Mercosur Association Agreement could be an obstacle to ensuring that the environmental SDGs are coherently integrated into the three pillars of the strategic partnership.

This analysis shows us the state of the art of environmental SDGs in interregional cooperation. Future research must pay increased attention to what extent the commitments made at the High-Level declarations and the objectives of the EU programmes in the region have an actual impact on the monitoring and implementation of SDGs. For instance, it remains to be seen whether the EU's key contemporary projects such as the Global Gateway and EU's investments in the LAC region will contribute to the implementation of the environmental

SDGs. On the Latin American front, the new developments associated with Brazil's renewed environmental agenda since the beginning of the Presidency of Lula da Silva, who has revitalized the Organisation of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty and the Amazon Fund – which is mainly comprised of financing from European countries – may also bring new dynamics to EU-LAC cooperation in the environmental agenda.

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