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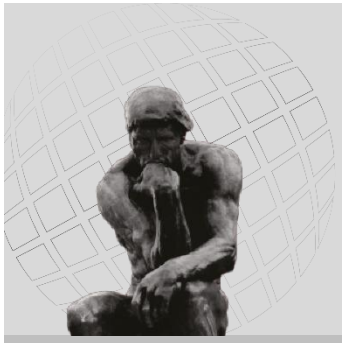

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Influence of the European Green Deal on international trade agreements: analysis of the EU-MERCOSUR case

Influência do Pacto Ecológico Europeu nos Acordos Comerciais Internacionais: análise do caso UE-MERCOSUL

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Abstract

This study conducts an analysis of the impact of the European Green Deal (EGD) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement, addressing gaps in existing literature regarding the integration of global sustainability frameworks into regional trade agreements. Examines how EU socio-environmental policies shape international trade relations, focusing on their implications for sustainable development in MERCOSUR countries. Employing bibliometric and documentary analysis, the research delves into the interplay between global and regional agendas during negotiations, highlighting trade interdependence and local implementation challenges. The results reveal that, although the clauses of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement promote sustainable practices, their effectiveness is constrained by insufficient enforcement mechanisms and local adaptation challenges. The study provides novel insights by highlighting the need for harmonized sustainability policies between the EU and MERCOSUR to ensure compliance with the agreed clauses and foster meaningful regional integration..

Keywords: EU-MERCOSUR agreement; European Green Deal (EGD); socio-environmental policies; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Trade and sustainability.

Resumo

Este estudo realiza uma análise do impacto do Pacto Ecológico Europeu (PEE) e dos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS) no Acordo UE-MERCOSUL, abordando lacunas na literatura existente sobre a integração de estruturas globais de sustentabilidade em acordos comerciais regionais. Examina como as políticas socioambientais da UE moldam as relações comerciais internacionais, com foco em suas implicações para o desenvolvimento sustentável nos países do MERCOSUL. Utilizando análise bibliométrica e documental, a pesquisa investiga a interação entre as agendas global e regional durante as negociações, destacando a interdependência comercial e os desafios locais de implementação. Os resultados revelam que, embora as cláusulas do Acordo UE-MERCOSUL promovam práticas sustentáveis, sua eficácia é limitada por mecanismos de execução insuficientes e desafios locais de adaptação. O estudo fornece novos insights ao destacar a necessidade de políticas de sustentabilidade harmonizadas entre a UE e o MERCOSUL para garantir o cumprimento das cláusulas acordadas e promover uma integração regional significativa.

Palavras-chave: *Acordo UE-MERCOSUL; Pacto Ecológico Europeu (PEE); políticas socioambientais; Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS); Comércio e sustentabilidade.*

Summary

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) is regarded as one of the most important economic blocs. The European bloc, consisting of a political and economic union of 27 countries, aims to promote integration and development among its members by facilitating the unrestricted movement of goods, services, capital, and people (European Commission, 2022). The EU implements common policies in several domains, including trade, agriculture, environment, energy, and fisheries, with the euro serving as the shared currency for 19 of its member countries. The economic relations of the EU extend beyond its internal framework, as evidenced by the trade agreements it signs with external countries (Young, 2016; Hagemejer et al., 2025).

The EU-MERCOSUR Association Agreement serves as an important example. MERCOSUR, also referred to as the Southern Common Market, is an economic integration bloc initially founded by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. It later incorporated Venezuela (2006), Bolivia (2024), and other South American countries that currently hold the status of associated countries (MERCOSUR, 2024).

Considering that sustainable development represents an international commitment and that international political and commercial relations can contribute to this commitment, this article examines the role of global socio-environmental and climate policies, including the EGD, in shaping the clauses of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement (De Oliveira et al., 2024). I also explore the potential for harmonizing and implementing joint actions that promote fairer and more sustainable trade between the two blocs.

To understand these implications, we draw on the theoretical framework of the liberal theory of complex interdependence, developed by Keohane and Nye in “Power and Interdependence” (1970; 2011). This approach argues that state relations extend beyond the traditional focus on military power and security, recognizing the international system as dynamic and interdependent, with multiple channels of interaction and continuous flows of political and economic exchanges between states and non-state actors (Nye, 2011). From this perspective, and considering the existing ties between the EU and MERCOSUR countries (particularly in the economic sphere), the Association Agreement can be interpreted as a strategic instrument for consolidating interdependence in trade and sustainable development.

Revisiting the 1977 work, the authors observe that interdependence is discussed and recognized through shared interests, highlighting that cooperation can serve as a means of promoting political stability (Keohane & Nye, 1987, pp. 729-730). This idea is reinforced in a later publication, in which they highlight how complex interdependence transforms international relations, shifting the focus from military power to economic and institutional dimensions (Keohane & Nye, 2011).

From this perspective, the Agreement to be signed between the EU and MERCOSUR can be viewed as a mechanism to stimulate the development of MERCOSUR while granting the EU access to strategic markets within this "negotiating" framework and to natural resources necessary for achieving its energy transition objectives. To this end, the proposed association should be mutually beneficial. However, the primary inquiry concerns the methods to ensure and maintain an equitable distribution of these advantages, especially in instances where governments manipulate the rules for their benefit (Keohane & Nye, 1987, p. 734).

In the context of this discussion, we also consider the analysis of Cardoso & Faletto (1981), which warns of the risk that interaction between blocs exposes and widens inequalities, (re)producing a state of dependence that limits the autonomous development of peripheral economies (Cardoso & Faletto, 1981; Harrison & Paulini, 2024). This contrast allows us to articulate the notion of interdependence with that of dependence, providing a critical theoretical framework for understanding how, under certain conditions, economic integration can reproduce structural asymmetries (Del Pupo, 2025). The combination of these frameworks makes it possible to critically examine the tensions between economic development and sustainability in the negotiations of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement and assess the potential of the proposed clauses to contribute to the global sustainable development agenda.

In light of the theoretical and political-economic context outlined, this study aims to critically analyze the socio-environmental clauses of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement, assessing their potential to promote fairer and more sustainable trade between the two blocs, in line with global commitments such as the Economic and Social Development Plan (EEP) and the SDGs. The analysis focuses on understanding how these provisions have been shaped by EU sustainability policies, the extent to which they align with MERCOSUR's development priorities, and the main challenges to their effective implementation, particularly with regard to governance, economic asymmetries, and the risk of reinforcing patterns of dependency. By addressing these elements, the research contributes to the debate on the construction of trade agreements capable of reconciling economic growth, social equity, and environmental preservation.

This study adopts a qualitative approach, guided by interdependence theory (Keohane & Nye, 1977; 2011) and the dependency approach (Cardoso & Faletto, 1981), with the aim of critically analyzing the tensions between economic development and sustainability in the negotiations of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement.

Defining the search terms constituted the first methodological step. Keywords associated with the EGD, the SDGs, and the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement itself were selected, always in association with the term "MERCOSUR." These words were organized into four central axes: sustainable development; trade and environment; international cooperation; and EGD.

Data collection was conducted through a survey of academic publications indexed in Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and SciELO, as well as official documents extracted from repositories of the European Commission and MERCOSUR. The inclusion of SciELO sought to complement the international literature widely indexed in Scopus and WoS by incorporating Latin American academic production, particularly relevant to the MERCOSUR context. The timeframe considered for bibliometric and documentary analysis covered the period from 2010 to 2025, capturing the most active phase of negotiations and the institutional and political debate surrounding the Agreement. In addition to the context of the bibliometric analysis, the theoretical framework incorporated classic works and previous studies of historical relevance, fundamental to understanding the regional integration process and the development of interdependence theory.

Two complementary techniques were applied for the analysis: bibliometric and content analysis. The bibliometric analysis, conducted with the support of VOSviewer software (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010), allowed us to map the frequency, co-occurrence, and interrelationships between the selected terms, revealing the most recurring themes and their connections in the scientific and political debate. The next step was content analysis, conducted through a reading of the documents, identification of relevant occurrences, and thematic categorization of the references. This analysis covered a variety of topics, such as trade and the environment, sustainable development, governance, SDGs, energy transition, decarbonization, climate justice, and international agreements. The process sought to ensure methodological consistency and reproducibility, allowing for the identification of nuances and meanings associated with the use of the analyzed terms.

Finally, analysis criteria were established to understand the alignment of the content with global sustainable development commitments, assess adherence to European climate mitigation and energy transition policies, and examine the relevance to the socio-environmental clauses of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement.

The results indicated a prevalence of terms associated with climate action and renewable energy in both academic literature and official documents, highlighting the prominence of these topics in institutional discourse. These findings reinforce the hypothesis that the socio-environmental clauses of the Agreement align with the EU's commitments to the climate agenda and the transition to a green economy.

The methodological approach adopted allowed us not only to quantify the presence of central concepts in the debate, but also to critically interpret them in light of the political, economic, and environmental dynamics that shape the cooperation process between the blocs, highlighting the challenges to effectively implementing the clauses and promoting sustainable and equitable development within the scope of the Agreement.

2. Global goals for sustainable development

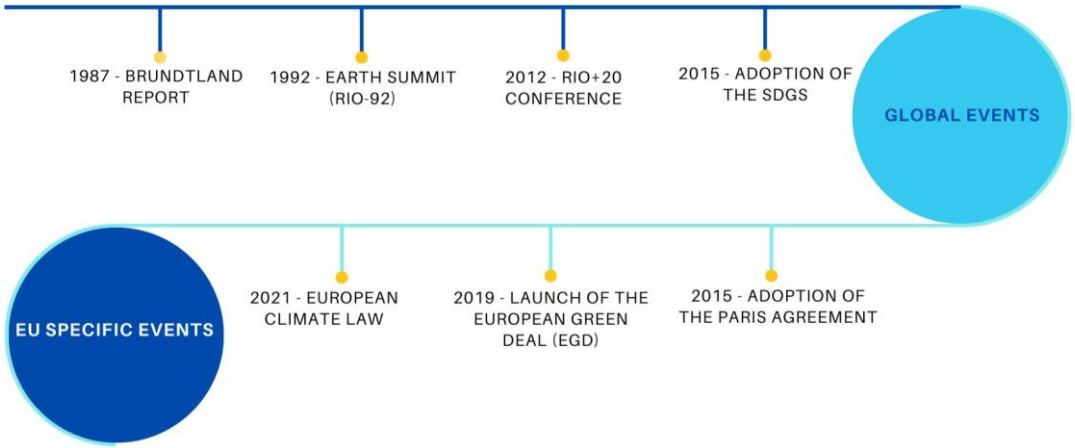
The 21st century is characterized by important and urgent global challenges, particularly in relation to climate issues. The concept of sustainable development (re)emerges as a holistic response, aiming to balance economic development with climate justice, environmental sustainability, and social equity (Purvis et al., 2019). The United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda represents a key political moment in formulating a comprehensive action plan to address these challenges in a global and integrated manner (United Nations, 2015).

Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of international and regional discussions on sustainability. The top layer presents the evolution of major global events that shaped the concept of sustainable development and led to the creation of the SDGs. These milestones include the 1987 Brundtland Report, which introduced the concept of sustainability, and the 1992 Earth Summit (Rio-92), which placed the environment at the center of international discourse. Another pivotal event was the 2012 Rio+20 Conference, which facilitated the creation of the SDGs that were formally adopted by UN Member States in 2015 (United Nations, 2012).

The lowest layer focuses on EU-specific events that have shaped environmental and commercial policies, especially in the context of negotiations for the UE-MERCOSUR Agreement. In 2015, the adoption of the Paris Agreement signified the commitment of the EU to reducing carbon emissions, which was further reinforced by the EGD in 2019. Complementing these actions, European climate law, enacted in 2021, solidifies the legal obligations of the EU to sustainability and the subsequent reduction of carbon emissions.

The EU employs a mechanism for global reduction through the equalization of carbon taxation on imports with the value of internal production. This policy seeks to deter the transfer of polluting production processes to regions with lower costs (Mittiga et al., 2024).

Figure 1 – Evolution of Global and European Sustainability Policies: Key Events



Source: United Nations (2015), Unfccc (2015), European Commission (2021), Sdgf (2023), United Nations (2024), and SHI (2019). Developed by the authors.

The framework, as illustrated in Figure 1, facilitates examining the alignment between global sustainability efforts and regional EU environmental policies, highlighting the convergence of commitments in sustainability. The EU and MERCOSUR represent two economic blocs of considerable international influence that have substantially influenced global trade. Both exhibit unique characteristics in terms of economic development, political structures, and socio-environmental issues, including the adoption and implementation of global policies, such as the SDGs. These goals, part of an agenda established by the UN in 2015, comprise 17 goals and 169 targets to be achieved by 2030.

The 2030 Agenda seeks to address key global challenges, such as the eradication of poverty and hunger, promotion of equality, universal access to education, and mitigation of climate change, among others (United Nations, 2015).

Although the SDGs remain essential in advancing a broader and more inclusive global agenda, an analysis of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement negotiations indicates that the EGD and Paris Agreement exert a more direct influence on the trade and environmental provisions within the proposed interregional agreement, thereby shaping both the scope and ambition of the sustainability clauses. Understanding the impact of sustainable development on EU-MERCOSUR negotiations necessitates an examination of the interplay between policies designed to meet global sustainability commitments. These initiatives establish a clear framework for aligning trade policies with SDGs and mitigating the effects of climate change. However, the implications of these initiatives, particularly the EGD and Critical Raw Materials Law (CRMA), require thorough analysis.

The CRMA was established by Regulation (EU) 2024/1252 of the European Parliament and Council of April 11, 2024. It seeks to establish a legal framework that ensures a secure and sustainable supply of essential raw materials for strategic sectors, including renewable energy, digital technology, defense, and transport (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2023). Considering the substantial reliance of the EU on the import of certain raw materials, such as lithium, cobalt, rare earths, and other minerals vital for the green and digital transition (IEA, 2021), raises concerns regarding the adverse impacts of the competition for low-carbon technologies (Berthet Et Al., 2024; Palmieri et al., 2024).

The EGD and the CRMA can increase demand for critical metals and minerals, potentially intensifying extractive activities in resource-rich countries, such as Argentina and Brazil. Although these MERCOSUR countries are committed to global sustainability goals, they face economic pressures that may lead to intensified extractive practices, which pose environmental and social risks (Arias, 2025).

This situation may also jeopardize progress in meeting some of the SDGs. Increased exploitation of mineral resources, in the absence of adequate and sustainable regulation, may result in deforestation, water pollution, and the displacement of local communities, thereby exacerbating social and regional inequalities. Therefore, applying EU environmental policies and the SDGs in the Agreement can also be interpreted from the perspective of "dependence" (Cardoso & Faletto, 1981, p. 162-163). The imbalance of powers may lead to and perpetuate an inequitable dependence within the established free trade relationship. This EU, as an important economic force, may impose stricter environmental standards on MERCOSUR countries, potentially obstructing their economic development and acting as a substantial trade barrier.

Consequently, although the Paris Agreement and EGD are considered fundamental to the sustainability framework of the EUS, it is imperative that the sustainability discourse during the negotiations of the Agreement recognizes the distinct challenges faced by South American countries. Sustainable development in MERCOSUR cannot be dissociated from an in-depth analysis of the consequences of green extractivism and the need for trade policies that promote energy transition, social equity, and environmental preservation. Strengthening governance and regulatory mechanisms is essential to mitigate the negative impacts of extractivism (Berthet et al., 2024) and prevent the global energy transition from introducing new socio-environmental problems to the region. The interaction between global environmental policies and local realities in MERCOSUR should be prioritized in future actions adopted under the Agreement

3. European green deal and sustainable development goals

The EU has prioritized sustainability in its development policy and, more recently, through the EGD, has established more ambitious green targets, including achieving climate neutrality in Europe by 2050 (European Council, 2024a). International and regional targets and goals are ultimately reflected in the external trade relations of the EU with non-EU countries, necessitating cooperation among all involved parties (Borrell, 2020).

Launched in December 2019 through an integrated approach (Filipović & Lior, 2022) by the European Commission, the EGD is a development policy that reflects and closely aligns with the SDGs. It underscores the commitment of the EU to the environment and global sustainable development aimed at meeting urgent environmental demands and addressing climate change (European Commission, 2024).

The main objectives of the EGD are to achieve a minimum reduction of 55% in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 (compared to 1990 levels), promote renewable energy, advance the circular economy, preserve biodiversity, and develop sustainable mobility (European Council, 2024a). These EU objectives align with the SDGs, which constitute a framework of targets designed to address the major social, economic, and environmental challenges globally. These targets encompass various issues, such as poverty eradication, gender equality, climate action, and clean energy (United Nations, 2024).

The EU has sought to incorporate the SDGs into its environmental policy framework via the EGD to promote the transition to a green and sustainable economy (European Commission, 2023). However, this process has encountered challenges and difficulties. The COVID-19 pandemic has substantially affected the economy and society, complicating the implementation of sustainable measures (Vavoura & Vavouras, 2022). In addition, the conflict between Ukraine and Russia and its geopolitical ramifications have fundamentally influenced developments within the European bloc (European Council, 2024b).

To understand the articulation between the EGD and the SDGs in the EU, it is important to observe the chronological evolution of legislative and strategic initiatives that structure this policy.

The following timeline presents the main milestones of the EGD between 2019 and 2024, highlighting how the EU has operationalized its climate, environmental, and social commitments in alignment with the 2030 Agenda. These events illustrate not only the consolidation of the European regulatory framework but also its potential in the context of post-pandemic recovery and a just ecological transition.

Source: European Commission (2025). Developed by the authors).

In response to these challenges, the EU implemented NextGenerationEU in 2020, a temporary €750 billion package aimed at boosting recovery in the EU following the COVID-19 crisis (Toth et al., 2022). The package was launched to address the immediate economic and social damage caused by the pandemic while facilitating a green, digital, and resilient recovery in the long term, thereby promoting economic and social cohesion and convergence (Radu & Radu, 2023).

The NextGenerationEU funds, allocated through National Recovery Plans (NRPs) (Koundouri et al., 2021), are specific to each EU member state and seek to address the challenges identified in the country-specific recommendations. In addition, a minimum of 37% of the budget for each plan must be allocated to climate objectives, and another 20% must be designated for the digital transition (Radu & Radu, 2023).

The NRP should be aligned with the EGD and the SDGs, serving as a tool to support the development policies established by the EU (Borchardt et al., 2020). The NRPs are structured around six main pillars, taken from the Annual Report on the Implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Plans (European Commission, 2024), as illustrated in Table 1, and finance projects that address key issues such as poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, drinking water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work, innovation, infrastructure, and climate action (European Commission, 2023).

Table 1 – Pillars of the NRPS

Pillar	Objective
Green Transition	Boost the green economy and promote renewable energies, energy efficiency, and green mobility.
Digital Transformation	Accelerate the digitalization of the economy, including digital infrastructure, digitization of businesses, and administration.
Social and Territorial Cohesion	Reduce social and territorial disparities and promote social inclusion and equality.

Pillar	Objective
Economic Resilience	Strengthen economic resilience and promote strategic investments and economic policy reform.
Policies for the Next Generation	Invest in education, training, and research and development to prepare the next generation for future challenges.
Health and Economic Resilience	Strengthen health systems and economic resilience by investing in health infrastructure and a sustainable economy.

Source: European Commission. Annual Report on the Implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Plans. Brussels: European Commission, 2024. Developed by the authors.

The integration of the SDGs, alignment with the 2030 Agenda, and climate neutrality targets of the EGD demonstrate the efforts of the EU in addressing environmental and climate challenges alongside immediate economic and geopolitical crises (Borchardt et al., 2020). This effort highlights the commitment of the bloc to sustainable development and reinforces its leadership role in climate action and environmental sustainability internationally.

Despite the prominent role of the EU in global governance, attributed to a long-term consolidation project supported by bilateral and multilateral actions (Borrell, 2020), considerable disparities persist in the implementation of the SDGs among member countries. This highlights the need for further efforts within the European context. Overall, the EU presented notable progress in the latest report on the achievement of SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 5 (gender equality), and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) (Pompeu & Cruz, 2025), with moderate progress on most of the other SDGs (European Commission, 2023).

4. Mercosur proposal for implementing the sustainable development goals

The MERCOSUR bloc was established by the Treaty of Asunción in March 1991 and subsequently expanded by the Treaty of Ouro Preto in 1994, which created a formal customs union (MERCOSUR, 1991; MERCOSUR, 1994). The main objective of MERCOSUR is to facilitate the unrestricted movement of goods, capital, services, and people among its member states. In addition to the four founding members, Venezuela, which is suspended for political reasons (Marques Junior, 2018), and Bolivia, which joined as an associate member in 1996 and became a full member on July 5, 2024 (DW, 2024). MERCOSUR includes associate countries that can join free trade agreements without receiving the benefits of the customs union. Peru entered into a free trade agreement with MERCOSUR in 2003, with intentions to become an associate member. In 2004, MERCOSUR signed a cooperation agreement with the Andean Community of Nations (MERCOSUR, 2004).

MERCOSUR has committed to the global SDG agenda. The significance of MERCOSUR in this context is amplified by the rich biodiversity and ecosystem diversity among its member states, rendering regional cooperation crucial for addressing transboundary challenges, such as deforestation, pollution, and the sustainable management of natural resources (Soldano Garcez, 2015).

The SDGs have been incorporated into MERCOSUR by implementing internal policies to promote renewable energy, combat inequality, and protect biodiversity (MERCOSUR, 2018). These policies have been formally discussed and adopted at several meetings and official statements of the bloc, such as the Meeting of MERCOSUR Environment Ministers (RMMAM) and the Sub-Working Group No. 6 (SGT-6), which focuses directly on environmental issues (Bressan, 2023).

Within the bloc, mechanisms, such as the MERCOSUR Environmental Information System (SIAM), have been created to centralize environmental data, promote transparency, and facilitate cooperation among member countries (OECD, 2018). Discussions within the SGT-6 and RMMA focus on key areas, such as biodiversity conservation, wildlife

trafficking prevention, and natural disaster preparation, specifically aligning with SDGs 13 (Climate action) and 15 (Life on land) (Bressan & Garcia, 2023).

Despite the contributions of SGT-6 and the RMMA to certain specific SDGs, official documents reveal that references to the SDGs in the decision-making and technical bodies of MERCOSUR often lack specificity, especially concerning the concrete policies required to achieve the established goals (United Nations, 2022). The lack of details and specific targets highlights the need for more concrete actions by Member States to ensure compliance with the SDGs by 2030.

Furthermore, the alignment of the parties in relation to socio-environmental objectives remains heterogeneous, which was in the latest report on the 2030 Agenda, illustrating that only 1/3 of the SDG targets have a chance of being met by 2030 in the South American bloc. Approximately 46% of the targets are in a slow process of implementation, while 22% are stagnant or at risk of regression (United Nations, 2022).

A comparative analysis of the performance of MERCOSUR countries in relation to the 2022 SDG Index reveals important nuances in the progress and challenges faced by each nation towards the goals of the 2030 Agenda. As presented in Table 2 below, Brazil and Uruguay, with different focuses, lead the region with solid performances. Brazil demonstrates notable advancements in infrastructure, sanitation, and renewable energy, reflecting substantial progress in poverty eradication and access to essential services.

However, it faces major challenges related to environmental preservation and combating deforestation (CODS, 2023). Uruguay, in turn, has an outstanding performance in health, education, and governance, with clear results in gender equality and a low perception of corruption. However, the country still needs to overcome moderate challenges in innovation and infrastructure, areas that directly impact its long-term competitiveness (CODS, 2023).

Argentina and Paraguay have also made progress, especially in specific areas, such as clean energy and sanitation; however, they share difficulties in increasing investment in innovation and protecting ecosystems. Bolivia and Venezuela face the greatest obstacles, especially in poverty management, environmental preservation, and economic recovery (CODS, 2023). These two countries have suffered the greatest setbacks, with high deforestation rates and difficulties in guaranteeing basic services, such as health and education, thereby reflecting the impact of socioeconomic crises.

The variations in the results reflect both progress in specific areas and the structural barriers that need to be overcome for these countries to achieve the SDGs by 2030. The data presented in Table 2 below, taken from the 2023 SDG Index Report (SDG Index), shows the index's range from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating greater alignment with the 2030 Agenda.

Table 2 – Pillars of the NRPS

Country	SDG Index 2022	Highlights	Challenges
BraZIL	66.99	SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation), SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy)	Deforestation and environmental preservation
UruguaY	66.09	SDG 3 (Good health and well-being), SDG 4 (Quality education), SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy), SDG 16 (Peace and justice)	Moderate challenges in infrastructure and innovation
Argentina	64.44	SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy)	Low investment in innovation and infrastructure
Paraguay	61.6	SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation), SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy)	Low proportion of protected areas and industrial contribution
Bolívia	56.17	SDG 8 (Decent work), SDG 5 (Gender equality)	High deforestation rates and low coverage of protected areas
Venezuela	51.95	SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 3 (Good health and well-being), SDG 9 (Innovation and infrastructure)	High poverty, deterioration in health and education, economic crisis

Source: Centro de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible para América Latina y el Caribe (CODS). SDG Index Report 2023. Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2023. Developed by the authors.

MERCOSUR countries have adopted different approaches to implementing the SDGs, reflecting the different economic, political, and environmental realities of each member state. Although progress has been made in specific areas, such as renewable energy and education, the lack of effective regional coordination and economic and environmental pressures, especially related to green extractivism, have created major challenges to the full achievement of the SDGs within the bloc (Moreno, 2021). The lack of integrated governance leads to isolated and often contradictory approaches, especially regarding environmental issues and extractivism. The exploitation of natural resources to meet global demand has created tensions within the bloc, which can undermine efforts to align regional policies with global sustainability goals (Del Pupo, 2025).

Despite regional efforts to address the SDGs, considerable challenges remain due to limitations in the effective application of common standards (Kehoe et al., 2020). This situation hinders coordination and, consequently, the progress and effectiveness of the environmental agenda. Furthermore, a lack of effective harmonization of environmental rules and regulations exists among member countries, leading to disparities in environmental practices and the risk of increased environmental degradation (Palmieri et al., 2024; Koundouri et al., 2021).

The different realities and circumstances of member states become obstacles to adopting regional environmental policies (De Almeida & De Vasconcelos, 2015), limiting their effective implementation. Frequent and completely opposing political transitions result in changes in government priorities and subsequently damage regional integration efforts (Bressan, 2023; Moreno, 2021). Consequently, the continuity of previously adopted agendas is affected. For example, the denialist stance on environmental issues adopted by leaders of some member states, as in the case of Brazil during the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro, was a factor that influenced the progress of the environmental agenda in MERCOSUR (Belém Lopes et al., 2022).

Despite the challenges and unique characteristics of its member states, MERCOSUR has proven fundamental for environmental protection in the region and global governance of sustainable development (Bressan & Garcia, 2023). Economic and political integration and cooperation in South America, represented by MERCOSUR, are essential in this context (Caichiolo, 2017). However, this necessitates investments that strengthen environmental and social protection policies to ensure a just transition to a sustainable economy (Mata & Cristino Frota Mont'alverne, 2024.

5. Influence of the european green deal and sustainable development goals on the eu-mercosur agreement: focus on socio-environmental issues

The trade agreement established between the EU and MERCOSUR offers opportunities to boost sustainable development. The influence of European green policy can bring substantial benefits by introducing advanced technologies and sustainable practices (Eckes & KRAJEWSKI, 2023). However, specific concerns remain regarding the environmental and social impacts of this Agreement, especially with regard to environmental preservation and labor right protection (European Commission, 2019).

The text of the Agreement in principle addresses several important aspects of sustainable development through its clauses, which seek to liberalize trade in goods, services, and investments while incorporating environmental and social commitments (European Commission, 2024). A central aspect of the text is the chapter on "Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD)," which reflects the recognition by parties that increased trade should not compromise environmental integrity or labor conditions but rather promote sustainable development (Ghiotto & Echaide, 2019).

The parties consent to maintain labor and environmental standards to attract trade and investment, reaffirming the right of each party to legislate on environmental and labor issues (European Commission, 2024).

However, one of the main criticisms of the chapter is that its provisions are not binding, i.e. there is no effective sanction mechanism in case one of the parties fails to comply with its commitments (Orbie & Van Den Putte, 2016; Hagemejer et al., 2025). This issue has already been observed in other EU trade agreements, such as the EU-South Korea Agreement (Orbie & Van Den Putte 2016).

The lack of enforcement of the socio-environmental clauses raises concerns about the effectiveness of the provisions and their ability to guarantee the protection of environmental and labor rights in the context of growing international trade. Table 3 below presents a correlation between the clauses of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement, their respective themes, and objectives, highlighting the commitments assumed by the parties. The selection focused on the socio-environmental clauses explicitly contained in the chapters on trade and sustainable development. The clauses were organized thematically to facilitate comparative analysis.

Table 3 – Clauses Of The EU-Mercosur Agreement

Clause	Related Theme	Objectives
Trade and sustainable development	Environmental and labor standards, respect for international conventions	Balance between economic growth and environmental and social protection
sanitary and phytosanitary measures	Consumer safety, animal, and plant health	Preservation of human health and the environment in a commercial context
Dialogues	Animal welfare, biotechnology, food safety; antimicrobial resistance	Promotion of public and environmental health through sustainable practices
Technical barriers to trade	Trade facilitation; regulatory convergence on technical standards	Promotion of commercial practices that respect environmental standards
Public procurement	Transparency and fairness in procurement processes; sustainability criteria	Incorporation of sustainability criteria in government purchases
Intellectual property rights	Protection of plant varieties; environmental innovations	Encouragement of responsible innovation and environmental protection
Forest management and responsible business conduct	Sustainable forest management, corporate responsibility, and zero deforestation	Promotion of sustainability in business practices and natural resource management
Subsidies	Subsidy policies, transparency; control of market distortions	Balancing public policy objectives with the prevention of market distortions
Occupational health and safety; Climate change	Commitments to occupational health and safety, climate change; respect for environmental multilateral agreements	Integration of workplace safety practices and climate commitments into trade
Biodiversity, forests, and fisheries	Biodiversity protection; combating illegal logging and IUU fishing	Preservation of natural resources and ecosystems; alignment with sustainable trade practices

Source: Centro de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible para América Latina y el Caribe (CODS). SDG Index Report 2023. Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2023. Developed by the authors.

Reflecting the strategic alignment of international trade agreements with global sustainability goals, Table 4 below illustrates the correspondence between the socio-environmental clauses of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement, the SDGs, and the European Green Deal initiatives. The mapping was performed by cross-referencing the Agreement's text with official documents from the European Commission, the United Nations, and the European Council. This identified

connection reflects the effort to promote trade practices that boost economic growth while addressing urgent socio-environmental challenges (Ghiotto & Echaide, 2019).

Table 4 – Clauses Of The EU-Mercosur Agreement

Agreement Clause	Related SDGs	EGD
Sanitary and phytosanitary measures	SDG 3 (Good health and well-being)	Public Health and Food Safety
Trade and sustainable development	SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth)	Decent Work and Sustainable Economic Growth
Public procurement	SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production)	Circular Economy and Responsible Consumption
Occupational health and safety and climate change	SDG 13 (Climate action)	Climate Neutrality and Adaptation to Climate Change
Biodiversity, forests, and fisheries	SDG 14 and 15 (Life below water and life on land)	Biodiversity and Sustainable Management of Natural Resources
Renewable energies and energy efficiency	SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy)	Renewable Energies and Energy Efficiency
Innovation and sustainable infrastructure	SDG 9 (Industry, innovation, and infrastructure)	Innovation and Development of Sustainable Infrastructures
Social and economic inclusion	SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities)	Promotion of Social Inclusion and Reduction of Inequalities
Governance and transparency	SDG 16 (Peace, justice, and strong institutions)	Governance, Rule of Law, and Transparency
International partnership	SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals)	Promotion of International Partnerships for Sustainable Development

Source: European Commission. EU-Mercosur Association Agreement – Final Consolidated Text. Brussels: European Commission, 2024. United Nations. Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. New York: UN, 2015. European Council. European Green Deal. Brussels: Council of the European Union, 2024. Developed by the authors.

In addition, the analysis revealed that SDGs 7 (Clean energy) and 13 (Climate action) are prominently featured in discussions regarding the Agreement. In February 2023, negotiations advanced with the publication of an additional text to the Agreement in Principles, which introduced important modifications and additions in critical areas, including climate change, trade and sustainable development, biodiversity, and natural resources (European Council, 2024b).

The new text also sought to address criticisms that pointed to the lack of binding provisions and robust monitoring mechanisms. Table 5 below, based on a specific comparison of the socio-environmental provisions of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement texts, presents an overview of these modifications and their implications, highlighting both the advances made in the additional text and the persistent limitations.

Table 5 – Comparison Of The Clauses Of The EU-Mercosur Principal Agreement And Its Complement

Socio-environmental aspects	SDG	EGD	Principal Agreement	Text Additional
Environmental protection and labor rights	SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth)	Decent work and sustainable economic growth	Generic clauses on environmental standards Commitment to protecting labor rights	Reaffirmation against setbacks and commitment to maintaining high standards of sustainable development Specific focus on eradicating child labor and promoting freedom of association

Socio-environmental aspects	SDG	EGD	Principal Agreement	Text Additional
Changes climate	SDG 13 (Action climate)	Climate neutrality and adaptation to climate change	Commitment to the Paris Agreement	Details of commitments, including progressive and successive NDCs
Biological Diversity and Sustainable Forest Management	SDGs 14 and 15 (Life below water and life on land)	Biodiversity and sustainable management of natural resources	Commitment to the Convention on Biological Diversity and forest conservation	Focus on effective implementation and monitoring of Biodiversity Combating illegal deforestation and promoting sustainable trade in forestry products
Cooperation	SDG 17 (Partnerships to implement the goals)	Promoting partnerships for sustainable development	Mention of interregional cooperation	Emphasis on cooperation in sustainable value chains and resource efficiency
Rights humans	SDG 10 (Reducing Inequalities)	Promoting social inclusion and reducing inequalities	Commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights	Reinforced commitment to human rights and indigenous peoples
Civil society	SDG 17 (Partnerships to implement the goals)	Promoting international partnerships for sustainable development	Role of civil society organizations in the agreement	Establishment of a consultation mechanism and promotion of interaction with civil society
Monitoring and Review	SDG 17 (Partnerships to implement the goals)	Promoting international partnerships for sustainable development	Mechanisms general monitoring	Specific mechanisms to monitor and evaluate implementation

Source: European Commission. EU-Mercosur Association Agreement – Draft Text 2019. Brussels: European Commission, 2019. European Council. Additional Instrument to the EU-Mercosur Association Agreement. Brussels: Council of the European Union, 2024. Developed by the authors.

The supplementary text to the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement offers additional interpretations and clarifications on several socio-environmental clauses of the original document. It reinforces existing commitments while also emphasizing the practical challenges associated with their implementation and monitoring, especially in the absence of binding mechanisms (European Commission, 2025).

The results obtained in this study indicate that, although the socio-environmental clauses of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement are aligned with global sustainability commitments, their effectiveness remains compromised by the absence of binding mechanisms. These findings corroborate previous studies showing that, despite the potential of the Agreement to promote sustainable development, the lack of enforceable provisions in socio-environmental clauses continues to be a critical barrier to effective implementation (Hagemejer et al., 2025; Kehoe et al., 2020; De Oliveira et al., 2024). The recurrent emphasis on voluntary cooperation, while politically acceptable to both blocs, limits applicability and risks perpetuating structural asymmetries identified in dependency theory (Cardoso & Faletto, 1981; Del Pupo, 2025).

This scenario also corroborates criticisms identified in the literature. Comparative analyses of other EU trade agreements indicate that sustainability commitments without robust monitoring and sanctions mechanisms tend to have limited impact on environmental protection and labor rights (Harrison & Paulini, 2024). Similar concerns have also been raised regarding the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement itself (Palmieri et al., 2024).

On the other hand, proposals such as the inclusion of clear performance indicators, public accountability obligations, and inclusive civil society participation, as highlighted in recent sustainability chapters of trade agreements (Arias, 2025), could mitigate these limitations. Therefore, the results reinforce the need to strengthen governance structures and align implementation strategies with the socio-economic contexts of MERCOSUR countries to ensure that the Agreement achieves its declared sustainability objectives.

In addition, the document reiterates the importance of effectively implementing the Paris Agreement, reaffirming the commitment of the parties to uphold environmental and labor standards (Pompeu & Cruz, 2025). The modification of the generic commitment to biodiversity protection represents an important advancement, now incorporating the obligation to implement national biodiversity strategies and action plans, which may lead to a more tangible impact on environmental preservation (European Commission, 2023).

An important example is the Circular Economy Action Plan (2020), published through Communication of the European Commission (COM(2020) 98 final), which establishes measures to increase the durability of products and combat planned obsolescence, a practice in which products are designed to have a reduced useful life, encouraging early disposal and continued consumption (Gayer et al., 2023). With this policy, the EU seeks to guarantee consumers the so-called “right to repair”.

These guidelines set parameters that also impact the commitments assumed by the European bloc in its trade agreements, such as the one signed with MERCOSUR. The European experience, in this sense, highlights the complexity of regulatory harmonization between the EU and MERCOSUR, requiring Latin American countries not only formal commitments, but also structural adaptations in their production and legal systems, with a view to effectively implementing the SDGs and ensuring equitable conditions of commercial competitiveness.

However, the effectiveness of these measures relies on the establishment of rigorous monitoring mechanisms and the ability of countries to conduct audits to ensure compliance with commitments (Harrison et al., 2019). Furthermore, the effectiveness of the Agreement depends on the capacity of MERCOSUR member countries to implement these policies at the local level, potentially placing the Southern Cone bloc in a situation of dependence (Cardoso & Faletto, 1981, p. 162) and consequently leading to vulnerability and inequality vis-à-vis the European bloc.

The influence of the EGD and SDGs on the clauses of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement presents multifaceted implications. In theory, this integration may facilitate the adoption of sustainable practices among stakeholders, particularly in reducing deforestation and promoting renewable energy use. This aligns with SDGs 13 (Climate action) and 15 (Life on land). However, these policies need to be adapted to local economic realities to avoid the perception of covert trade barriers (Koirala, 2019).

Notably, adopting more stringent environmental and social standards imposes substantial additional costs, especially for SMEs, which may face financial difficulties in conforming to the new standards established by the Agreement. This may adversely impact the competitiveness of strategic sectors in MERCOSUR and lead to trade disputes, especially if the requirements are perceived as non-tariff barriers (Koirala, 2019; Palmieri et al., 2024). Without adequate financial support or incentives, implementing these standards may be limited, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities among MERCOSUR member states (Acharya, 2018).

6. Conclusion

The EU-MERCOSUR Agreement offers an opportunity to advance sustainable development, considering its economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The provisions concerning biodiversity, forests, human rights, and

working conditions illustrate the aspiration to promote equitable and environmentally responsible trade, recognizing the interconnectedness of trade and global sustainability.

The methodological analysis demonstrates that the global objectives for promoting sustainable development, improving EU environmental policies, and addressing climate issues are integral to the Agreement. However, the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms and reliance on critical primary resources continue to limit its potential to serve as a true catalyst for sustainable development, particularly considering the importance of the Agreement due to its scale and the resources at stake.

The analysis indicates that the absence of binding mechanisms in the socio-environmental clauses and the implementation challenges remain major obstacles to fully realizing these provisions.

Despite the progress represented by the clauses addressing deforestation and promoting sustainable forest products, MERCOSUR countries may encounter substantial challenges in their implementation capacity, including structural limitations in adapting global sustainability policies to their local contexts.

Another important consideration is the impact on MERCOSUR companies. Although the Agreement can offer a more regulated environment with higher standards, companies may face considerable barriers in adapting to the new requirements, especially in terms of costs and regulatory complexity. This may create economic imbalances and increase inequalities, necessitating the development of strategies to address these critical issues.

The effectiveness of the Agreement is also linked to the political will of all parties involved in adopting solid governance and overcoming practical barriers to its implementation. The EU-MERCOSUR Agreement can indeed facilitate the integration of sustainable development into international trade. However, the parties should assume responsibility for ensuring that socio-environmental commitments are translated into concrete, harmonized, and measurable actions capable of promoting real sustainability beyond mere economic growth.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the academic debate on the integration of sustainability into trade agreements by providing a critical assessment of the EU-MERCOSUR Association Agreement from the combined perspective of the European Green Deal, the Sustainable Development Goals, and dependency theory. This approach advances understanding of how sustainability clauses are shaped by geopolitical, economic, and governance factors, and offers an analytical framework that can be applied to similar interregional trade agreements.

From a practical perspective, the findings provide policymakers, trade negotiators, and stakeholders in both blocs with concrete insights into the structural and institutional adjustments needed to ensure that socio-environmental commitments translate into measurable and effective results. They also highlight the importance of adopting binding mechanisms, monitoring systems, and inclusive governance processes to prevent sustainability provisions from becoming non-tariff barriers or perpetuating structural inequalities.

Methodologically, the use of bibliometric mapping, combined with content analysis, allowed the identification of central axes, such as sustainable development, trade and environment, international cooperation, and the European Green Deal, and their recurring association with the term "MERCOSUR." This analytical strategy not only reinforced the alignment of the Agreement's clauses with global sustainability policies, but also revealed how academic and institutional discourses converge around these categories, offering a replicable framework for future studies.

These contributions can inform future negotiations and revisions of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement, such as the current discussions in the European Parliament on strengthening the Sustainable Development chapter, as well as guide MERCOSUR initiatives to improve the monitoring and enforcement of environmental clauses internally and in agreements with other partners.

The study also has limitations inherent to the methodological approach adopted. The analysis relied primarily on documentary and bibliometric techniques, focusing on secondary sources and data available in scientific and institutional databases. While this choice allowed for a broad and systematic overview of the relationship between the SDGs, the European Green Deal, and the text of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement, the lack of primary data collection limited the incorporation of deeper insights from the institutional actors directly involved. Furthermore, the temporal

scope and reliance on publicly available documents may have restricted access to more recent or confidential information. Acknowledging these limitations highlights the need for further research that incorporates complementary qualitative and empirical approaches, such as interviews with policymakers or impact assessments at the local level.

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