

Shaping Europe's international role

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The decisions that are made over the next three months will shape Europe's international role in the future. The script that drives global policy making is being rewritten, in response to the financial crisis, climate change and global security challenges. Meanwhile, the institutions of the European Union are on the brink of a radical overhaul. By January 2020, we will have new institutions, new leaders and the outline of a new script. But will we also be optimistic about Europe as a progressive force in the world?

Tackling the three big challenges we are facing – the financial crisis, climate change and security – will require new frameworks and structures for international cooperation and providing what are often described as global public goods. Europe has special advantages. It works, or tries to work, on the basis of shared values. It offers economic, financial, diplomatic and emerging military options.

Several new arrangements at the European level have the potential to ensure that Europe is a progressive force, but only if six conditions are met.

First, the links between development and other sectors must be made more explicit. Some countries talk of this as 'joined-up thinking', or strengthening coherent policy making – in economic matters, but also in Iraq, Afghanistan and other areas where diplomats, soldiers and aid workers must find ways of working together. In Europe, the phrase is 'policy coherence for development'. In the Commission's own analysis, the Common Agricultural Policy has been a prime example of the failure to achieve policy coherence, as has immigration policy. But Europe has actively begun to develop joined-up strategies for Africa, for example, or for specific regions. Progress in delivering these strategies needs to be monitored. Has the EU used all its collective resources constructively to bring peace to Somalia? How would we know? Who is accountable?

Second, taking development seriously means having a strong development commissioner at the heart of policy making. Too often in the past, development has been a detail left to one side while the 'big beasts' scramble for the glamorous portfolios like competition or trade. It is ironic that EU member states have insisted on open recruitment procedures for the heads of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and UN agencies, yet they allow decisions on the appointment of EU commissioners to be made largely behind closed doors.

Third, the development commissioner needs the staff and the resources to do the job. The existing arrangements are fractured and unsatisfactory. The instruments of European development cooperation, which add up to nearly €10 billion a year, are split in geographic coverage and ownership between two commissioners – development and external affairs – and have different forms of parliamentary accountability. Particularly intriguing questions are whether the proposed new European External Action Service will be designed as a champion of development, and what its relationship will be to EuropeAid.


Fourth, the European Parliament must raise its profile on development issues. The development committee has a new chair, Eva Joly, a French Green MEP, whose job it will be to rally MEPs behind a more ambitious and comprehensive vision of development, with a strong focus on policy coherence for development.

Fifth, European development cooperation has been characterized by a high degree of accountability to developing countries, and this needs to be preserved. The EU-Africa strategy is jointly owned by the two sets of partners. The Cotonou Agreement between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states has strong arbitration procedures and is governed by joint councils of ministers and

parliamentary assemblies. Europe must strengthen its partnerships. Why, for example, should Asian countries like India or Pakistan not benefit from the same kind of accountability structures as those that apply to the ACP states?

Finally, none of this will make any difference unless words and action come together. The EU already has a consensus on development policy, signed in December 2005, by heads of government meeting in the European Council, but also by the Parliament and the Commission. That consensus affirms the central objective of poverty reduction and of development 'as a central goal by itself'. The consensus needs to be updated, however, to reflect the changing agenda.

It is easy to imagine a Europe enmeshed in its own problems, treating the developing world as a threat or as a suitable recipient of our charity, and relegating development to a minor role as the handmaiden of foreign policy. But in the coming three months we have an opportunity to craft a different approach. ■

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