

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

"Development Aid is not all Plain Sailing"

Five Questions for EU Development Commissioner Andris Piebalgs

Andris Piebalgs, the EU Commissioner for Development, has long lobbied for sustainable development. Before taking office in 2010, he was European Commissioner for Energy from 2004-2009 and received several awards in recognition of his policies. Since then though, a lot has changed in this world. The financial crisis seems to be turning power relations around. While emerging countries like China and India are growing stronger, some EU countries' economies are at risk of failing.

In this time of unstable economies in EU member countries – can Europe still serve as a role model to other nations at all?

I think the EU still has a lot to offer. More countries want to join the European Union and I think this is the best testimony you can get. And I also would be wary about using the word "failing". As the Commissioner for Development, I have been in refugee camps and other heartbreaking places. We all have a vivid memory of a terrible famine in Somalia from last year and even today around 1 billion people go to bed hungry every day, so Europe is far from being a "failed" state. In some of the EU countries, people ask me why we should give money to the poor in Africa while we are poor here in the EU. But this is simply incomparable. People do not have access to electricity, sanitation such as running water or toilets; they don't have money to buy bread and often there is not even a shop to buy it in. I think for those of us who are lucky enough to grow up in Europe, it is difficult to imagine the scale of poverty of more than 1 billion people in the world.

But luckily, most Europeans are compassionate and generous. I'm glad that the EU is taking its global responsibilities seriously. Despite the crisis, the EU is the largest aid donor in the world and we are using our knowledge and experience to help people in the poor countries to fight poverty.

How should European development cooperation adapt to the changing global power relations?

First of all, I welcome the involvement of the new donors. Countries such as Brazil for instance, achieved a lot of success at fighting poverty in their own country, and I am sure their knowledge and enthusiasm can only be beneficial for the poor nations. And the EU is also changing. Now we have the European External Action Service, which helps to coordinate the EU voice in foreign affairs. More even: the Lisbon treaty put the fight against poverty at the heart of EU foreign affairs and this makes us stronger. But we are also adapting our approach in development policy. Only recently I proposed an "Agenda for Change". I would like to concentrate on fewer countries, where EU aid can be the most effective. This is a response to the changing realities. Some countries, like India and China, are very good at solving their poverty-related problems at home, so EU aid can be put to better use in the countries that need it the most. Of course, we are still ready to help, if needed, and we will work together, but on a different scale.

European development cooperation has been trying its best to change the world for more than 50 years – but it still has to face a lot of criticism. What are its main mistakes? And what are the main successes?

In recent years, the debate about aid has become more ideological, which doesn't help us have a constructive dialogue between various partners and political options. But the facts are that aid works in many parts of the world. Only recently, the global goal to provide access to clean drinking water for the poor has been achieved. With European Commission funds alone we put 9 million children into school

and trained over 720,000 teachers. And I can give you a lot more good examples. Of course, development aid is not all plain sailing. This is a difficult field, as the root causes of poverty are complex and aid alone will never be able to lift countries out of poverty. This is why I am proposing to use EU aid to stimulate sustainable and inclusive growth as well as help countries with democratisation. Only stable and secure countries with organised civil societies can provide sufficient conditions for people to grow, find jobs, and educate children. The Arab Spring is an excellent example of what can happen when democratisation principles are not respected.

But EU aid for instance has been too fragmented. We were working in too many areas; therefore our impact was disbursed and not very visible. For this reason, I want to concentrate on fewer sectors, where we can really change the lives of many and achieve high-impact results on the ground. I also dedicate my time to improving cooperation with other donors. It is very important not to duplicate work but to complement each other. We should, of course, start at home within the EU family and this is what we do. Joint programming of aid is progressing. Globally, the conclusions of the Busan Forum suggest that aid donors from all over the world see it as a problem and are ready to work and find solutions.

If you could choose to be a rock star – like Bono of U2, for instance – the manager of a huge internet company such as Google or Facebook, or the EU Commissioner for Development: Which role do you think would be best to reach development goals?

To win the fight against poverty, we need all the involvement we can get. Stars are helpful in raising awareness about the problems of people who live miles away from Europe and we sometimes simply do not know about the tragedies that happen so far away. The involvement of the private sector is also crucial, because poor countries need investment; they need companies to create work places exactly in the same way we need them in Europe. The companies you mentioned are also important because they operate in a digital, social media world. Today, the Internet is a tool that can change people's lives, so I'm happy to see that the use of the Internet in Africa is growing. People get connected and start organising themselves via social media. Moreover, I think this can play an important part in shaping civil society. But I'm also convinced that politicians have an instrumental role. So far, governments are the biggest donors of aid and therefore willingly bear huge responsibility on their shoulders to lift millions out of poverty. The EU Commission is a large donor, too, but our job is also to coordinate with other Member States. As EU institutions we also do not have this historical baggage that is carried by some countries and therefore we can work in an impartial way, which allows us to be more effective. So I take my job as a privilege but also as a huge responsibility.

If you met the famous fairy who promises to immediately make three of your wishes come true, what would you like to change to make this world a better place?

I would first ask her to stop the violence. All the conflict situations cause enormous and unjust suffering. Take the situation in Syria, for example. Such events really shouldn't take place in the 21st century. My second wish is closely linked to my personal experience. I grew up in the Soviet Union (Latvia was part of it) and I witnessed the dangers of living in a sharply polarised world. The Cold War is over and I hope similar events will never divide the world again. My wish is that countries and leaders cooperate with each other, rather than fight one another. And the risk of such divisions still exists today. My final wish would be that all families, including mine, are healthy and safe. For most of us, the well-being of people who are close to us is the main ingredient of happiness and I wish this ingredient could always be present.

Questions by Eva-Maria Verfürth and Sarah Klein