

Committee guide: From refugees to SDGs: The challenges of EU development

Written by Linda McAvan on 4 April 2017 in Opinion
Opinion

The first half of this mandate secured some important victories, but the coming years are set to be particularly challenging, writes Linda McAvan.



Linda McAvan | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

The first half of the current mandate will undoubtedly go down in history as one of the most turbulent moments for the EU, if not the world.

The aftermath of the 2008 crash has led to eurozone instability, falling or stagnant living standards for many, which in turn has promoted growing mistrust in the political establishment and, of course, Brexit.

Globally, a resurgent Russia, an EU-sceptic US President, conflict in the Middle East and fragile states in Africa have added to the cocktail of domestic pressures facing us.

These pressures have profoundly affected our committee's work. Most pressing has been the unprecedented refugee and migration movements which have tested Europe's solidarity as millions have fled conflict and poverty. No surprise then that the focus for our committee - and two of its key achievements - in the past two and a half years are both connected to forced displacement.

The first focus, education in emergencies, was chosen as a priority at the end of 2015 in response to the crisis where millions of children and young people living in refugee situations were missing out on their entire school life.

At that point, education spending as a percentage of humanitarian aid was just two per cent. Given the importance of education, which gives refugee children some sense of normality as well as future life skills, we set our goal to double this aid.

With an all-party consensus and tremendous support from European humanitarian aid and crisis management Commissioner Christos Stylianides, we are now on track to reach a target of six per cent for 2017.

The second focus was to get emergency funding for refugees in EU countries like Greece, struggling to cope with the unprecedented flow of refugees.

Normally, the funding and expertise of the EU's humanitarian arm, DG ECHO, could only be used outside the EU's borders, reducing avenues to funding for NGOs.

Responding to these concerns, Council and the Commission agreed to extend ECHO support to refugees in Greece and other affected countries.

There are still many problems, but at least now the EU institutions are pulling together to improve the situation - and MEPs are carefully monitoring developments.

There were also two important landmarks during the first half of this mandate. First, the European year of development (EYD) in 2015 was an opportunity to showcase the EU's work as the world's biggest aid donor. Second, 2015 saw the adoption of the new UN 2030 agenda and sustainable development goals (SDGs) - this represented a global rethink in development policy.

The second half of our mandate will be dominated by translating the SDGs into concrete policies. MEPs have been clear that implementing the SDGs requires reimagining not just EU development policies, but the EU's internal policies as well.

This is now happening, starting with a new European consensus on development, currently under negotiation with the hope that an agreement will be reached by Council, Parliament and the Commission this summer. Ensuring these initiatives are properly funded is essential.

In Addis Ababa in 2015, governments agreed to broaden development financing to include domestic resource mobilisation and the private sector. MEPs are now working on new legislation to deliver that extra investment, the European fund for sustainable development (EFSD).

This fund is central to the EU's new multi-billion external investment plan (EIP) aimed at de-risking private sector investment in more fragile countries.

Our committee is also pushing for action against tax evasion by closing legal loopholes that reduce

ability to raise domestic spending. But aid also matters and we want to see EU countries deliver on their development aid targets.

In that context, Brexit will bring challenges for development policy. The UK has long been a major player in EU development policy and one of the few member states to have delivered on its 0.7 per cent promise.

Currently, it's unclear how the EU's core development instruments could change and whether EU member states, without the UK, will retain their commitment to development and increase their spending to 0.7 per cent of GDP as promised. One thing seems certain: limiting the impact of Brexit is essential if we are to tackle the common global challenges we face.

The policies of the new US administration could also represent a challenge. If the US is stepping back from its commitments on development, sexual health and reproductive rights and climate change, will the EU be willing or able to take up the slack and increase its own commitments? Some tough decisions lie ahead.

The coming years will see significant work on renewing the Cotonou agreement between the states of Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific as the current agreement expires in 2020. Linked to this, MEPs will have an input on the forthcoming EU-Africa partnership and Latin American policy.

After our success on obtaining binding legislation on conflict minerals, we have started work on examining how to ensure that workers in the supply chain of the clothing sector are protected so that we avoid tragedies like the Rana Plaza disaster of 2013. We will vote an important report on textiles in April and host an event in Parliament to explore related issues.

In such turbulent times, bringing our work closer to the people is vital. Parliament is an open institution, but we could go further.

Options could include opening up hearings to citizens' questions, on Twitter for example, hosting more lively debates by inviting speakers holding opposing views so people understand the complexity of development, finding better ways to report back when our MEPs go to developing countries to check that taxpayers' money is well spent.

Giving a face to hunger and suffering remains important, but we need to do much more to show the successes, where lives are being transformed and real progress made.

So yes, we live in challenging times, but pretending we can close the door on globalisation and the changing world is not the answer.

Instead, we must plan for the long term, stay on track, deliver on the SDGs and keep our eye on the real prize: making our world safer, more equal and prosperous, while restoring the planet's ecological balance. It is the best investment we can make in all our futures.

About the author

Linda McAvan (S&D, UK) is Chair of Parliament's development committee

Tags

[Brexit](#) [1]

[Committee guide](#) [2]

[Refugee crisis](#) [3]

[Development](#) [4]

[European Commission](#) [5]

[Foreign Affairs](#) [6]

Categories

[SDGs](#) [7]

[International Relations](#) [8]



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- [2] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/tags/committee-guide>
- [3] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/tags/refugee-crisis>
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