

Neven Mimica: Leaving no one behind

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Interviews

With the 2019 European Development Days Conference fast approaching, European Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven Mimica explains how focused actions and resource pooling are crucial to eradicating some of the world's biggest challenges.



Neven Mimica | *Photo credit: Beau Hart*

In what ways can EU development policy address this year's European Development Days (EDD) themes of inequality and leaving no one behind?

Inequalities are present everywhere, but they hit developing countries harder. If you look at any area of development policy; they are all affected by inequalities in some way. EU action in this domain is not new, but rising levels of inequality around the world have highlighted the need to follow this issue closely. In development cooperation, we intend to provide a global and comprehensive response to inequality. This will involve ever-closer cooperation with partner countries, EU Member States, international organisations and civil society to increase the impact and value for money. At an international level, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes a specific goal on reducing

inequality, together with related targets across its other goals. At EU level, the European Consensus on Development puts inequality and leaving no one behind, among other issues, at the heart of EU development cooperation policy. To this end, we work with partners at global, regional and national levels. We support sustainable growth and jobs, social protection systems, domestic revenue mobilisation and progressive tax policies. We are committed to eliminating discrimination and to promoting inclusive digitisation and technological change. And we work for universal access to basic services, starting with health and education. In future, we will seek to mainstream inequalities more systematically in all our development cooperation.

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According to a recent UN report, Up to a million species face extinction. What can the EU do to help poor and middle-income countries protect their valuable biodiversity?

It is encouraging to see how much attention this issue has recently attracted, notably thanks to the UN report. The challenge now is to scale up our concrete actions. Ensuring that development happens in a sustainable way is at the heart of my work. This is about a rapid and green transition to ensure that jobs and economic growth are decoupled from the environmental destruction and climate change. It's about protecting our only planet's environment and its biodiversity, which is the basis for ensuring our future here on Earth. The EU is already engaged in a wide range of programmes around the world to protect the environment and natural habitats. To give just one example, we committed €20m last year to the Congo Basin to protect forests, support biodiversity conservation and combat illegal wildlife trafficking. Overall, our investment rose to €350m in 2018 to support biodiversity in developing countries. Much still needs to be done. New trends, such as population growth, are placing increasing pressure on biodiversity. This is why we are also investing in the circular and green economies. We are also implementing major sectoral policies, such as forests, wildlife trafficking and ocean governance. We hope that our actions on those fronts will help tackle specific challenges that can have major impacts on biodiversity.

“This is about a rapid and green transition to ensure that jobs and economic growth are decoupled from the destruction of environment and climate change”

Which areas do you believe the SDGs have been most successful and how do you think the EU should focus on delivering against them in the next commission?

I believe the greatest achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been to make all the international actors agree on the priorities, establish concrete goals, set a deadline (2030) and make everyone pull in the same direction. Focused actions, synergies, coherence and pooling of resources are crucial for eradicating some of the world's biggest challenges, such as poverty, equality, peace and climate change. The EU is fully committed to contributing to their achievement.

The SDGs are proving successful in guiding actions for achieving a sustainable future. The EU and its Member States have recently assessed their progress in supporting developing countries to achieve the SDGs. There are many good examples, such as the 8 million people that have been assisted against food insecurity, including nutrition programmes for nearly a million women and children under five. We are also looking to the future and finding the best ways to work together to achieve the SDGs.

There are a growing number of non-governmental actors such as Bill Gates and new actors, such as China, becoming involved in development activities. Does this have any impact on the way the EU looks to deliver its development policies in the future?

Our approach towards new actors in the development world is to grasp the nettle together. If we adopt an approach with a long-term vision and can really be a win-win for all concerned, we can tackle head-on all the challenges we face, funding included. All efforts and resources are needed to tackle the immense challenges of sustainable development across the globe. The EU is determined to push the boundaries in this sense. We will seek to work with new actors and institutions and we have included new instruments, like policy loans or financial guarantees, in our toolset to make sure that our actions remain relevant, significant and fit for purpose. The EU is, and will remain, a global leader in taking a rights-based approach to development policy, inviting other donors to take sustainability, transparency and international standards - among others - as our common guides. With China, we have a shared commitment and interest in global sustainable development. Working together in the context of the Agenda 2030 will maximise the impact of our work.

“The EU is, and will remain, a global leader in taking a rights-based approach to development policy”

How is the EU helping to develop the role of civil society in the South (developing countries) and is it time for European NGOs to have a smaller role and let people from these countries and regions have a more direct input in EU development policymaking?

For sustainable development to happen, an active civil society is a crucial element. Engaged citizens can make a difference in many aspects of development, from governance to economic growth. This is why the EU is the world's leading donor for civil society organisations (CSOs). The EU supports their role in implementing the 2030 Agenda at country level and promoting local ownership, often leading to better results. The EU engages in strategic cooperation with civil society actors and ensures that their concerns and experiences feed into EU development policymaking. The EU places a strong emphasis on the role of CSOs in promoting jobs and growth in partner countries, as is seen, for example, in the European External Investment Plan, which aims to increase private investment in developing countries in order to complement public investment.

Some EU Member States are discussing whether funding earmarked for ‘development’ should also include spending money on security, trade and enhancing the private sector in the south. Is this something the Commission is considering?

Development is, by nature, multi-faceted, as shown by the Agenda 2030 and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which range from ending hunger to combating climate change and promoting peaceful societies. From a development perspective, the EU is already working on some of the areas mentioned, such as trade or cooperation with the private sector. In particular, through the Africa-Europe Alliance, we are working hard to support job creation by mobilising private actors, boosting investment and encouraging trade. They are all drivers for economic growth and sustainable

development. While much of this work is highly technical, the results are real, and people's lives are being transformed thanks to the jobs created. While the EU is fully committed to the ultimate goal of eradicating poverty, we have seen how many factors influence sustainable development. In this context, the security angle is not new, as both go hand in hand; no sustainable development is possible without security. From the Commission side, for the next long-term budget, we have proposed a new single financing instrument that would cover neighbourhood, development and international cooperation actions. It establishes a legal obligation to devote 92 percent of its total amount to Official Development Assistance.

“Engaged citizens can make a difference in many aspects of development, from governance to economic growth”

With the ongoing EU budget negotiations for 2021-2027, how confident are you that the EU will maintain its spending levels on development, considering the financial pressures of issues such as Brexit and other national political financial pressures?

I am confident that the EU will stand by its commitments, in particular on development cooperation. As you know, this is now in the hands of the EU Heads of State and the European Parliament, which has already shown its support for our proposal. From the Commission side, we have proposed an ambitious plan: a total of €123bn (2021-2027) for the new “Neighbourhood and the World” heading - a nominal increase of 30 percent over the current period. This increase sends a strong political message; that external action and development cooperation remain a clear priority for the Union, which continues to be the world's first development donor. To reinforce its external role, the Commission is proposing a streamlined financing instrument for the Neighbourhood, development and international cooperation with a budget of €89.2bn. It will increase flexibility and will have a global coverage, which will enhance the EU's capacity to respond to crises and unforeseen events and the coherence of the Union's external action. Brexit is one of the factors at play in these negotiations, but there are many others. Development spending is a long-term investment in our shared future. It is my firm hope that efforts will be maintained and increased with the approval of the Commission proposal, which has been long discussed and designed to make the best of the EU's external action for the benefit of all.

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