

World Environment Day: Keeping the SDGs in focus

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Opinion

The success of the EU in delivering its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) commitments depends on it adapting to changing approaches to funding and aid, writes Mirja Vehkaperä.



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In the past five years, the EU has committed itself to several development objectives by signing up to Agenda 2030, the Paris climate agreement and the New European Consensus on Development “Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future”.

These create a common framework for the EU and the international community to work together on the common pressing challenges; climate change, poverty, inequality and environmental degradation.

Signing these commitments should ensure they remain the focus of the EU’s development policy under the next European Commission.

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Currently, the sustainable development envisaged in the Agenda 2030 remains a challenge; it is far from certain it will be achieved.

Almost five years after adopting the sustainable development goals, the EU still does not have a strategic and comprehensive strategy on achieving them.

This applies to both external action as well as the different sectors within the EU.

Therefore, I hope the next Commission sets its sights firmly on the Agenda 2030 by developing and adopting a comprehensive SDG strategy, increasingly focusing on its implementation during the following five years.

“The European Commission should ensure complementarity of its humanitarian, development and conflict prevention and peacebuilding actions”

The EU should not lose sight of its commitments to, and aspirations for, the Agenda.

In recent years, we have seen an increase in humanitarian needs around the world.

Today’s crises, many of which are protracted, are complex and fluid, requiring emergency humanitarian and developmental responses.

The European Commission should ensure complementarity of its humanitarian, development and conflict prevention and peacebuilding actions.

The widely-welcomed pilot on operationalising the humanitarian- development nexus in a limited number of countries will hopefully be scaled up in the coming years.

There are other issues that the current European Commission has emphasised and that the next can build upon.

The concept of policy coherence is enshrined in the EU treaties; this has already been recognised at the highest level as one of the most important building blocks for achieving the SDGs.

Nevertheless, better systematic monitoring of policy coherence is needed to ensure that all policy sectors, not solely development, contribute to achieving Agenda 2030.

“It is clear that the traditional forms of overseas development aid will not be sufficient to

finance the Agenda 2030”

The partnership approach embraced by the current Commission will also hopefully be one of the guiding principles for the next Commission.

Furthermore, it must enhance its collaboration with Member States on development issues while being a leader and inspiration to them in development actions.

Nevertheless, the international landscape and the context in which the EU implements its development policy is changing rapidly; this will ultimately affect the EU’s approach to development cooperation.

The donor-recipient relationship and vertical decision-making structures that characterised official development aid, as well as traditional discourse and practices of aid, are becoming things of the past.

Instead, new official donors from the Global South have emerged with their own agendas and conditionalities.

Private actors are increasingly active, and the relative weight of traditional development aid is decreasing as new types of financing grow.

The north-south divide has provided space for more complex and multipolar international systems, with new economic powers and more economic growth in the South.

The technological and digital revolution is forging ahead.

In addition, closer to home, the EU will lose one of its most committed and experienced development actors when the UK leaves the Union.

New forms of finance, new actors and changing discourse and practices present both a challenge and an opportunity for the EU in the coming years.

For example, digitisation and technological developments provide innovative approaches for addressing development challenges, also encouraging small and medium-sized companies to contribute to development work.

Simultaneously, the private actors and companies must be made aware of the lessons learned from past mistakes in development cooperation.

Embracing and reforming relationships and partnerships, both old and new, will provide a more effective platform for common development efforts.

One example of these new approaches is the EU’s growing alliance with the African Union and the search for a real partnership with Africa.

At the same time, the EU is looking into comprehensive trade and partnership agreements with countries such as Vietnam, which not so long ago were merely considered as aid recipients.

This, too, is a recognition of new types of partnership with countries that traditionally were viewed through the donor prism.

I expect the next European Commission to promote an even stronger engagement of the private

sector in development policy and to build on the EU's external investment plan.

It is clear that the traditional forms of overseas development aid will not be sufficient to finance the Agenda 2030.

Trillions of euros are needed, and the future development financing system must include increased use of blending and other private funding instruments.

The EU's ability to facilitate investments will be crucial to its commitment to achieving the SDGs.

About the author

Mirja Vehkaperä (FN, ALDE) is vice chair of Parliament's development committee

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