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# The EU development policy consultations process: less talk, more action?

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# The Current Column

*of 14 February 2011*

## The EU development policy consultations process: less talk, more action?

Bonn, 14 February 2011. It is easy to criticise the European Union (EU). Its detractors disparage it for being too bureaucratic, too intransparent, too expensive, too distant from European citizens and not very democratic in nature. Yet, it appears that EU development policy-making is more open to public scrutiny and evidence-based guidance than the development policy of many EU member states. January 2011 brought to an end three major public consultation processes – all initiated by the European Commission – on the funding of EU external action after 2013, and on Green Papers on the future of EU development policy and the future of EU budget support.

The consultations called for views and evidence from member state ministries, think tanks ([see here the contribution of the German Development Institute on the future of EU development policy](#)), universities, development agencies, non-governmental organisations and the general public, including in developing countries, as to how to improve the overall focus, impact and quality of the EU's development policy package. The outcomes of the consultations are intended to feed into the upcoming negotiations over the EU's budget for 2014-2020 (also known as the 'Multi-Annual Financial Framework' in Euro-Speak) and a proposal from the Commission to be tabled in the summer on how to modernise EU development policy.

There is certainly room for improvement in the orientation and implementation of the Commission's development policy. But the EU as a whole cannot improve its effectiveness as a development actor without member states taking a critical look at their own policy objectives and implementation strategies, and how these fit within a broader European development agenda. Although the Commission and member states share competence over this policy area, bilateral development policy is still to a large extent considered a national prerogative. It is driven mostly by donor priorities and interests, a tendency that has notably increased in the wake of the financial crisis. In many cases the EU and its members still lack a coherent policy that would involve a broadly

shared consensus on objectives, an honest prioritisation in the face of trade-offs, and a convincing strategy of how to harmonise member state and Commission interventions. But to what extent do the consultations reflect this challenge?

The consultation on funding EU external action after 2013 asked respondents for their views on the priorities the EU should pursue on the international stage. If the Lisbon Treaty's stipulation that Union action be consistent with development goals is to be realised, potential conflicts between foreign policy, security and development interests will need to be identified and reconciled. The consultation also addressed the issue of coordination with member states, in particular on joint programming and co-financing to increase the impact of EU external funding. Respondents were asked whether there is a need for EU legislation, possibly in the form of a Regulation, to strengthen the Lisbon Treaty's provision that member states should coordinate their aid programmes. The sluggish implementation of the 2007 EU Code of Conduct on Complementarity and the Division of Labour in Development Policy indicates there is indeed a need for a binding commitment. Germany could take a leading role in this process following on from its leadership on the Code of Conduct, but is currently preoccupied with lifting the visibility of its own development policy rather than fully supporting a European approach.

The consultation on the future of EU development policy looked into the need to increase Europe's ability to promote inclusive growth and sustainable development, with particular attention on agriculture, food security and private sector involvement. The paper makes some timid attempts to broach the issue of improving the impact of EU development policy through greater coherence and better coordination. It nevertheless shies away from leading to a more controversial – yet much needed – decision on the priorities, respective strengths, weaknesses and comparative advantages of all stakeholders involved in European development policy. Proposals on how to modernise the latter make little sense if existing commitments are not honoured on harmonising

donor interventions – including those of actors beyond the development community – and a sharing of roles and responsibilities within the EU.

The most daring of the three consultations was arguably the one on budget support – the most contentious development policy instrument. The Commission has come under fire for its widespread support for the instrument, intransparent allocation and lax control mechanisms. The consultation demonstrates a constructive effort by the Commission to reflect this criticism and to reach out to member states to work towards a shared understanding of the potentials and risks of the instrument. In fact, it is indispensable that the Commission and member states speak with one voice – not least because divergent views on the use and content of conditionality, different understandings of criteria to release or withdraw budget support funds and inconsistent interpretations of underlying principles all undermine the instrument's effectiveness. This requires that member states not only criticise the Commission's approach but engage in a constructive dialogue and consensus-building process among themselves. For this reason, the Commission and all member states should take the Green Paper's title 'The future of EU budget support' seriously and

work towards a harmonised framework to manage budget support at the EU level.

The next step is to use the consultations to formulate a more concerted and effective EU development policy. As yet, it is unclear whether the processes will lead to a strategy for the Commission only, one that will also guide member states development policy or even a re-opening of debate on the 2005 European Consensus on Development. The time for collective action is now. The global development landscape is changing fast, challenges such as climate change, food security, migration, financial instability, insecurity as well as the final sprint towards the achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015 all require that the EU increases its capacity for action. After years of introspection the EU has emerged with a new institutional set up, notably the European External Action Service and the Commission's Directorate-General EuropeAid Development and Co-operation (DG DevCo), designed to sharpen the EU's profile as a global player. However, this will not happen while Europeans talk endlessly about how to work together rather than actually implementing the promises they have made. The world will not wait for the EU to overcome its internal differences.



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