



Leaving development cooperation behind: is the EU turning its back on Agenda 2030?

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While many are rejoicing at the prospects of increased resources for external action in the face of Brexit, this is by no means justified. The proposal for a Neighborhood, Development, International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) does not constitute an EU pledge to support partner countries' efforts to "leave no one behind".

Indeed, the proposal to merge 12 instruments from a wide array of policies – such as development, neighborhood, human rights and peacebuilding – into a single instrument de facto dilutes their distinct original objectives. This new instrument pledges to "uphold and promote the Union's values and interests worldwide". Read: member states' economic and policy interests in partner countries. This means that the most vulnerable regions risk being left out at the expense of countries with strategic geopolitical interest.

This reconfiguration marks a major shift away from the EU's principled and long-term approach to development cooperation. Agenda 2030 is clearly not the underpinning political framework for the EU's future external action. And aid effectiveness principles are to be applied "when relevant". But how and by whom will these judgments on relevance be made?

Clearly, the EU has lost sight of aid's original purpose: addressing the root causes of poverty through substantial investments in areas like health and education. Rather, development aid is now considered a tool to leverage partner countries' cooperation on matters linked to EU's interests, such as security and migration. This – and not putting the EU's political weight behind the Sustainable Development Goals – explains why the Commission proposes a much larger proportion of funds to be spent via geographical programmes.

Of course, foreign policy and development cooperation objectives do not inevitably clash, but there can be conflicts and the Commission provides no answers as to how they will be solved: who will set priorities, arbitrate between competing interests and ultimately decide? Who will control the resources?

These questions of accountability are all the more important as there is much more margin for interpretation planned under the new proposal: flexibilities for emerging challenges are being increased to 10% of the budget, and the Commission intends to allocate another 10% to migration, without detailing which specific areas will be prioritized. One should not overlook that EU elections are coming, that new Commissioners will be put in place and that polls for the progressive camp are all but promising. Therefore, too much flexibility risks pulling the EU further away from its principles and international commitments.

At the institutional level, things are even more unclear: how will responsibilities be shared between the EU External Action Service and DG Development? The same question goes for the European Parliament and the Foreign Affairs and Development Committees.

Many of our concerns align with the European Parliament's recurrent positions. We therefore count on the Parliament to use all its power to drastically amend the single instrument and turn it into a Sustainable Development mechanism, and to clarify its governance, including priority setting. We also urge Member States to support an alternative proposal that is aligned with the Lisbon Treaty and conducive to the realization of the Paris agreement and Agenda 2030. The clock is ticking, and there won't be a plan B.