

Global Development in Danger

As a rule, politicians like to be the providers of good news. Sadly, today that is not the case for both of us. Today – the 4th April 2008 – is not a good day in the battle against global poverty. Put simply, the world's top donor countries - including many EU Member States, the United States, Canada and Japan - are failing to stick to their cash commitments to ensure that the world's poorest people can have a better future.

The annual development aid figures for 2007 are way off target. Last year, European official development assistance (ODA) fell from 0.41% to 0.38% of Gross National Income. In real terms this means that the world's poor were more than 1.7 billion euros worse-off than in 2006. The target figure for 2015, set within the framework of the Millennium Development Goals, is 0.70%. Last year was a serious failure.

So, as mid-2008 marks the half-way point on the road to 2015's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), this is an opportunity to remind ourselves why such a downward trend is unacceptable. This is an opportunity for citizens across the globe to remind their governments and politicians of their promises and why together we 'must do better'.

1.7 billion euros could have helped change people's lives – for the better. It could have put a significant dent into the scourge of a billion people living on less than a dollar per day. It could have helped save some of the 11 million children who die each year from treatable illness – the majority of them under the age of 5 years. It could have helped to increase the number of people who have access to clean water. Still one in four people drink unsafe water. It could have helped to educate some of those 114 million children who don't receive a primary school education. It could have helped some of those 584 million women who are illiterate - to be able to read this article.

And if the shocking figures on child mortality, health or education just aren't enough to prompt us to act, then surely our own concerns over the global challenges of the future - such as climate change, migration or the fight against terror - are. If we stand any chance of tackling together these common issues, we must recognise that any solutions require bringing about significant improvement in the living conditions for people in developing countries. The increasing gap between the rich and poor countries, between the populations of "haves" and "have-nots" affect us all. The increased flow of migrants towards the European continent is one consequence of extreme poverty; of a lack of opportunity; of a sheer lack of hope among so many people - especially in Africa. Conflicts, insecurity, the dramatic consequences of climate change, epidemics: these all have a knock-on effect on Europe and the world's richest countries.

In a globalised world, the politics of development must face a new reality: clearly this means more opportunities, but it also means more risks and responsibilities. We cannot simply brush aside the development challenges that the MDGs put before us. Development cooperation must not be seen simply as 'institutional' or 'governmental' charity but as a crucial policy field which affects each and every one of us.

So it is time for European nations and other important donor countries to take action. It is time for development assistance to stop being a budget "after-thought". Rather development needs to be in the front-line of national budgets: a sector both citizens and politicians can be proud of. We must stick to our promises.

This is why Europe, as the world's largest overall aid donor, needs to set the example and reconfirm at the highest level the commitments it made in 2005 under Luxembourg's EU Presidency. This is why the European Commission will be proposing, on 9th April, new measures on aid volume and efficiency to ensure that we come up with the promised amounts and that we disburse them in a way that improves the lives of the poorest populations. The proposal includes a call to establish multi-annual timetables for increasing ODA, which will allow EU Member States to show how they stick to their target of increasing their contributions by 20 billion additional euros as of 2010. We call on EU Member States to show their support for this initiative and to work together to put us back on track. This is our opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to reach the Millennium Development Goals before it is too late.

We are the first generation with the possibility of tackling extreme poverty head-on and saying with conviction: we have the money, we have the cure, and we have the know-how. The real question it seems is whether we all have the necessary political will.

We have the choice.

*Louis Michel, European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid
Jean-Louis Schiltz, Luxembourg Minister for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Affairs*

Note: In 2005 Minister Schiltz and Commissioner Michel were the key actors in negotiating the agreement whereby the European Union will spend 0.70% of its gross national income on development assistance by 2015.