

Europe's aid own-goal?

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As humanitarian disasters in Burma and China combine with the global food crisis to expose just how vulnerable the world's poor really are, Europe's credibility as a development leader is now to be tested as never before.

A new report suggests that despite the commitments made in 2005 against the background of the global call to Make Poverty History, the EU is set to fall far short of its international aid promises.

Indeed, the facts show that a clear majority of EU governments are already failing to live up to their pledges. Aid levels fell in 18 of the 27 EU member states in 2007 and we are even seeing a fall in levels from countries that have traditionally been Europe's "aid champions". In 2007, overseas development assistance (ODA) fell by more than 10% in France and Belgium.

Now a report from Concord - a confederation of NGOs representing 1,600 European civil society organisations - estimates that, on current trends, the EU will have donated a staggering €75billion less than it had promised between 2005 and 2010.

This, when for so long it has been the EU that has led the way in showing the world exactly what can be achieved when like-minded countries work together to provide more high-quality aid, fairer trade rules, and cancellation of the external debt of developing countries.

The need for this development partnership between Europe and the world's poor has never been greater. Sub-Saharan Africa today stands at the epicentre of a crisis, witnessing a continuing rise in extreme poverty and shamefully high child and maternal deaths. More than a year since their midway review, we are still making only slow progress towards achieving the UN millennium development goals (MDGs).

Of course, some member states are setting positive examples that must be built upon. Despite this year's drop in UK development spending, Gordon Brown's budget commitments over the next three years will put us back on track. Spanish aid has rocketed up by 46%, and Spain is on target to meet 0.7% ODA by 2012.

We need the strong supporters of development to cajole our other key European nations along - particularly the French who are about to take over the EU presidency. President Sarkozy has shifted the goalposts on France's aid promises and on achieving 0.7% ODA by 2015 instead of 2012. In the three-year budget he is about to approve he must restore his commitment to the world's poor by setting out €1.5bn extra year-on-year.

European leaders must make preparations for an EU action plan on delivering more and better aid targeted at meeting the MDGs, to be agreed at the June European council. It should include adherence to key milestones to be reached by 2010 for progress on health, education and the environment. So too should it set out a clear timetable for predictable aid commitments designed to ensure that developing countries can plan for increases in public investment.

We know that aid works - the ability of poor countries to absorb and reap the benefits of aid is not in question. Experience has proved that quality, long-term aid is making an enormous difference, allowing poor country governments across the world to significantly raise spending on education, health and other actions to help the poorest communities lift themselves out of poverty.

With decisive action to put the EU's aid pledges back on track, millions more children will get the chance to learn to read and write, hundreds of thousands of women will deliver their babies safely, and those suffering HIV/Aids will gain access to the life-saving treatments they need.

But none of this will be possible unless Europe grasps the opportunity to take a strong lead before the G8 in July and the UN special session on the MDGs in September. So, as they prepare to meet in Brussels, EU development ministers must understand that Europe's credibility on development issues is at stake.

These are tough economic times, but France, Germany and other EU countries must maintain a strong commitment to support progress in Africa. At a moment when poor countries are ready and waiting to receive the aid that has been promised to them, rich countries must not walk away.

To walk away now would have devastating consequences. Speaking at the European parliament recently, Jeffrey Sachs put it simply: "If Europe isn't going to keep its aid promises then it should tell us now. We will cancel the MDGs."

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