The European Year for Development

At a time of economic crisis when there is a temptation for Europeans to focus on their own difficulties, the EU is turning its political attention to the developing world, in line with the motto – 'Our world, our future, our dignity'. 2015 is expected to be a pivotal year globally, with the final deadline for achieving the Millennium Development Goals, together with the September 2015 UN Special Summit on Sustainable Development Goals, and the Paris Climate Conference in December.

Origin of the Year

Since 1983, the EU has designated one topic as a focus for each year, with the aim of raising awareness of that particular topic and sending a strong signal about its political significance. In many cases this designation has been followed by new European action or legislation in the relevant fields. To date most European Years have focused on important social topics internal to the EU; but the European Year for Development (EYD) is the first ever to focus on the EU's external action.

While the idea of a dedicated year for development issues, traced back to 2010-11, is attributed to the Latvian Platform for Development Cooperation, part of the NGO umbrella association CONCORD, and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), it gradually gained widespread inter-institutional support.

The European Parliament's key contribution

The EP played a leading role in bringing the idea to fruition: its resolution of 23 October 2012 on an Agenda for change contained a specific recommendation to designate 2015 as the European Year for Development. This recommendation was then taken up by Parliament's President in a letter to the Commission President, co-signed by the EESC President, appealing for his support for the proposal to nominate the year 2015 as European Year of Development.

Based on a Commission proposal presented in July 2013, Parliament, on 2 April and then Council, on 14 April 2014, formally endorsed the Decision that 2015 be the 'European Year for Development'. The EP stressed in its resolution that 2015 is an appropriate moment to present the achievements of European development policy, which has broad support from European citizens in general terms, although they lack awareness of its details. The idea for the motto of the Year was actively promoted and defended by the Development Committee and its rapporteur, who stressed that the idea of 'human dignity' as the main concern of development cooperation should be at the centre of the European Year for Development. MEPs also underlined that the year could contribute to achieving broader understanding of policy coherence for development, aiming to reduce negative impacts of non-aid policies on developing countries, and to fostering among citizens in Europe and developing countries a sense of joint responsibility, solidarity and opportunity in a changing and increasingly interdependent world. They stressed the need to fully involve civil society organisations and partner countries in the Year's activities. The issue of global interdependence should be a key focus, to illustrate that development policy is more than just assistance, and to foster direct involvement, as well as critical reflection, in favour of development. MEPs also emphasised the need to raise public awareness of all forms of gender discrimination, as an impediment to development.

The three official aims of the 2015 EYD:

1. To inform European citizens about EU and Member States' development cooperation activities,
2. To foster direct involvement, critical thinking and active interest in development cooperation among EU citizens and stakeholders,
3. To raise awareness of the benefits of EU development cooperation and global interdependence, and enable broader understanding of the need for policy coherence for development.
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Organisation of EYD
The EYD will consist of various events and actions (awards, school contests, advertising campaigns, debates, sport events, etc.) taking place at European and national level, under national work programmes, with the involvement of civil society organisations and other stakeholders. All events will be based on the campaign's visual identity, motto and the thematic calendar: 12 themes will structure events organised at European, national and local levels. January was dedicated to the theme of 'Europe in the world' and February to 'Education', March focuses on 'Women and Girls', April on 'Health', May on 'Peace and Security', June on 'Sustainable green growth, decent jobs and businesses', July on 'Children and youth', August on 'Humanitarian aid', September on 'Demography and migration', October on 'Food security', November on 'Sustainable development and climate action' and December on 'Human rights and governance'.

The EYD has a dedicated website, accessible to all partners, together with EYD social media and a European Commission-managed Stakeholders' Group.

Flagship events
Events include a launch in Riga (hosted by the Latvian Presidency of the Council) on 9 January, a cultural event held on 17 January, a gender event in Latvia on 2 March, the European Development Days on 2 and 3 June, as well as a closing event organised by the Luxembourg Presidency on 8 December. In addition, the Committee of the Regions is hosting the 'Assises of Decentralised Cooperation', to be held on 1 and 2 June in Brussels, with 800 to 1 000 participants, many of whom are expected to come from developing countries.

European Parliament involvement
The EP’s Development Committee will contribute to several EYD events. These include a High-Level Panel during the European Development Days, a debate on girls as actors of development during the EP’s Open Doors Days in May 2015, an event at EXPO 2015 in Milan, and an inter-parliamentary committee meeting with national parliaments on the post-2015 development goals, to be held towards the end of the year.

Expected impact in an uneasy policy context
2015 is expected to be a pivotal year for development cooperation, with the expected agreement at the September 2015 Special Summit on Sustainable Development on a new set of common objectives to replace the Millennium Development Goals in the post-2015 period. Several other potentially decisive events will also take place, such as the Third International Financing for Development Conference in July 2015 and the COP21 Climate Conference in December in Paris. At operational level, we are seeing chronic humanitarian crises in a Middle East destabilised by the Syrian civil war and the rise of IS, together with the Ebola epidemic and various conflicts in Africa. All of this means that international solidarity remains vital in a globalised and volatile world. The EYD has an important role to play in this context by mobilising strong public support for the major commitments that will be needed, despite the backdrop of economic crisis in Europe.

According to Linda McAvan (S&D, UK), Chair of the EP’s Development Committee, '2015 is an opportunity to talk about EU development policy, to share stories about what has already been achieved, about progress with the Millennium Development Goals and the real difference made on the ground by these achievements in the world’s poorest countries. But it's got to be about more than past achievements and warm words. 2015 must be also a year of action on development, so that 2015 leaves a real legacy for development.'

Although the EU remains the largest provider of official development assistance (ODA), issues related to aid fragmentation (due to insufficient coordination between the EU and Member States), sometimes weak coherence across different EU policies and, in particular the commitments/payments gap which is affecting EU budget implementation, pose challenges to the EU's credibility as a leading development actor.

The EYD could therefore serve as the impetus to improve coordination between European and national development cooperation by means of a mandatory mechanism proposed by the EP, and enhanced policy coherence for development (i.e. taking greater account of the impact on development of other EU policies), as well as bringing in new financing sources for development.

Further reading
M Latek, The challenge of coordination of EU development policies, EPRS, January 2015.
A Brown and E Hefer (editors), Our Collective Interest: Why Europe’s problems need global solutions and global problems need European action, European Think Tanks Group, September 2014.
This is an updated version, following the launch of EYD 2015, of an 'At a glance' note published in January.