



"Focused aid does make a huge difference" Bill Gates tells Parliament

Committees: Committee on Development

Foreign aid works, so long as it is delivered efficiently, business magnate and philanthropist Bill Gates told the Development Committee on Tuesday. Mr Gates offered "living proof" of foreign aid successes, and urged the EU and its Member States to sustain it even in times of economic crisis.

Presenting the work of his foundation, Mr Gates concentrated on two areas where aid gets the best results: vaccination and agriculture. "Vaccines are an inexpensive means and great achievements have been made", he said, noting that measles has been eradicated in some parts of the world and that the number of children it leaves paralyzed each year has declined from 300,000 in the past to 3,000 at present.

"One of the most important statistics is the number of children under 5 who die every year. Back in 1960 it was over 20 million, now it's a bit over 8 million and my belief is that if donors do the right things within the next 15 years we can cut it in half again to be less than 4 million", predicted Mr Gates.

Agriculture aid and GMOs

On the issue of aid for agriculture, the key aim of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is to increase the productivity of farmers, since 75% of poor people are currently farmers.

Asked by Gabriele Zimmer (GUE/NGL, DE) whether it would not be better to tackle the food crisis by investing in sustainable agriculture rather than in GMOs, Mr Gates replied "We invest in any technique that avoids starvation. Most of our funding is directed to what we call 'conventional breeding' but there are some traits of crops, the ability to deal, for example, with drought, where GMO techniques have showed in the US pretty substantial gains (..) We will need to use new scientific techniques to feed the world".

Commitment to meet the MDGs

Mr Gates commended Europe's "phenomenal commitment" of 0.7% of GDP for development, adding that "if we get to 0.7 this means an additional 28 billion euro and it would allow us to reach the MDGs maybe not by 2015, but within the next 10 years". MEPs urged Mr Gates to pressure EU leaders and the European Commission to ensure higher development funding during 2014-2020.

The need to make the case aid was also stressed by Thijs Behrman (S&D, NL), given that in some European states, foreign aid is criticised and therefore tends to get cut. Commenting on the history of aid, Mr Gates said "A lot of it, a long history, was not given expecting to improve human lives. We can see cold-war aid policy of buying friendship". He underlined that it is important to improve how aid is delivered and communicate what goes well, e.g. the concrete results of vaccines saving lives. However, he also criticized some aid outcomes, e.g. in the field of budgetary support.

Aid and trade

Press release

Alf Svensson (EPP, SE) raised the issue of trade, noting the plight of young unemployed people in North Africa and the need for greater stability in the region so that investments can flow in. Mr Gates argued that an open economy and educating the labour force are the driving force, comparing the track record of Egypt, a big beneficiary of aid, and Turkey over the past fifteen years. "These are policy issues and are not related to aid", he added.

Positive effects of migration

Replying to questions by Maria Da Graça CARVALHO (EPP, PT), on the "brain drain" of health workers from the South to rich countries and by Francesco Enrico SPERONI (EFD, IT) on migration flows, Mr Gates underlined the positive effect of remittances, which on average double the income the migrants would have received in their countries of origin. "I wish there were more (migration). The main limiting factor is the tolerance of people in rich countries", he said.

Note to editors

Bill Gates' visit to the Parliament coincided with launching of the "Living proof" awareness campaign set up together with the advocacy group ONE. Its goal is to show that development aid is indeed effective and to change perceptions of foreign aid because it makes a difference to millions of people in the developing world.

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