

Translation of article from "Stuttgarter Zeitung", dated 20 September 2010

"Europe hasn't kept its promises"

Interview

The Commissioner for Development, Andris Piebalgs, is representing the European Union in New York. He knows he will come in for criticism because less funding has been provided than was agreed. But the man from Latvia promises things will improve.

Mr Piebalgs, aren't we deceiving ourselves when we talk about halving poverty by 2015, when the number of people suffering from hunger has only fallen slightly from the record figure of one billion?

I have only been in this job for six months. What I've seen on my journeys strikes me as being quite encouraging. The situation has definitely improved in those parts of the world where there are no military conflicts. Perhaps not quite as much as we would like - but people have enough to eat, healthcare is better, there is drinking water and children are attending school. And this decent standard of living owes something to development aid.

Perhaps so. But we're a long way from the ambitious targets that have been set.

When the Millennium Goals were proclaimed in the year 2000, there were 1.8 billion people living in extreme poverty. That figure has fallen to 1.4 billion today. But you also need to bear in mind that the population has grown hugely.

So you're an optimist?

I'm optimistic, but I'm aware that this is a challenge. Take Uganda, for instance. You can see that people have enough to eat, there are markets, which means there's commerce, there are health centres – and, above all, there are schools. Uganda's main problem lies in slash-and-burn practices, as there's no adequate energy supply. The country smells as though it's on fire. Another major challenge is urbanisation. The most abject poverty is to be found in the slums of the capital, Kampala.

So there is progress despite tremendous problems?

Yes. But the countries at war are frustrating - Somalia, for instance. How can you build or develop anything there? The same applies to Darfur. However, there has been some progress in southern Sudan. That spurs me on to work for more and better development aid.

Talking of "more", spending on development aid is some way removed from the target of 0.7 % of GDP. We've failed to meet our interim target.

We will reach 0.42% this year, though the figure is supposed to be around 0.56%. But the EU has never been good at meeting interim targets. That's why it was important to me that the heads of state and government made a strong commitment to the 0.7% target in June, despite the financial crisis.

Development aid is often forgotten in the thick of negotiations on national budgets.

That depends on the countries, but most of them have no binding targets. Many have adopted laws that provide for a gradual increase to 0.7%. That's the safest way. Otherwise there would be a real risk of our failing to meet the targets by 2015. But I'm staying optimistic.

What will the EU have on offer at the New York conference?

One billion euros, among other things. But the main point will be our undertaking to continue our commitment to development aid. And that's very important, because it's sometimes forgotten that the European Union has changed. New countries have joined. In my own country, Latvia, for example, many people are asking, "Why are we paying money to countries overseas? We've plenty of needs of our own." After all, they don't have the same historic links with developing countries.

Does this include a critical assessment of our own commitment?

We have two weak points to contend with in the EU. One is that we are still 27 individual donor countries. Each country works on its own; there are exchanges of information, but you can't say there's close cooperation. That has to improve. Haiti and Pakistan are examples that show we're moving towards that aim. Coordinating programme cycles is the absolute minimum we need to achieve. Secondly, each country provides aid to particular sectors, such as healthcare or the water supply. This means our aid is fairly heterogeneous. Instead, we must focus jointly on the areas that are of decisive importance for sustainable development. One example I've mentioned is a clean energy supply.

What good is the best possible development aid when other EU policy areas, such as agriculture, fisheries and trade, are not exactly consistent with it, to put it mildly?

Progress was made with the agricultural reform back in 2003. And we've opened our market up to the least developed countries. But we have to make sure that development policy interests are taken into account more in trade, agriculture and other areas. We are obliged to do this under the Lisbon Treaty. However, I'd like to warn people against falling into a misconception, given the changing world in which we live. Just imagine our market were completely free. Who would benefit? Would it be African countries? Or would it be large-scale producers such as Brazil, the USA or China? I think it would be the latter. They have the infrastructure to be able to supply goods quickly and cheaply. The developing countries, unfortunately, lack many of the things needed for survival in a free market. We mustn't make a new mistake with the forthcoming reform.

You admit the EU has made some mistakes. What are the developing countries doing wrong?

Some countries need to understand that their prosperity won't come from the outside, but lies within the country itself. It's only good governance, including anti-corruption measures and a good tax system, that can unlock this potential.

Is there a danger that the New York summit – like others before it – will end in mutual finger-pointing?

That will probably happen to some extent this time too. The profound injustices of the past continue to affect the present day. I'll come in for criticism, of course, because the EU hasn't kept its promise. But both sides could have done better. At the same time, we

can only be successful if both sides cooperate. Finally, I'd like to point out that a consensus is emerging on a joint final declaration.

Interview conducted by Christopher Ziedler.