

COMMITTEE ON DEVELOPMENT AND COOPERATION

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EFFECTIVENESS OF RELATIONS BETWEEN THE EU AND THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES AND THE IMPACT OF REFORM OF THE COMMISSION (exchange of views with NGO representatives)

The documents so far produced on the re-organisation do not confront the problem of the now famous "grey zone", how to link emergency relief to rehabilitation and development.

This type of crises represents the real challenge for the development community today and is affecting dozens of developing countries. About sixty countries lie in the grey zone and see a confused and not co-ordinated coexistence of sometimes-conflicting policies, projects and procedures.

Moreover, this type of situation is the major obstacle to any development policy as it prevents long term planning and appropriate needs identification, together with setting the communities in a state of acute vulnerability: the contrary of that "structural stability" that is a necessary condition for successful development actions.

In 1996 the EC had produced a famous paper which established the principle and methodology of the so-called Continuum. Assumed the importance of integrating different types of aid actions, carried out at different stages of the crisis in a country struck by a natural disaster or war, this document proposed good practices and policies to be implemented in order to ensure a sound management of such crises in order to lead the recipient country towards stability and a peaceful situation such to allow development programmes to be carried out.

In a paper produced and presented to European institutions one year ago, humanitarian NGOs proposed sound solutions to this problem and recommended an overall management of such grey zone by ECHO as the office that could rely on the specific know-how and procedural system required to deal with these situations. The same proposal was made by the independent evaluation team of the EC.

Paradoxically, this idea was refused by the EC without proposing any alternative solution. We learn now that the EC will present a proposal in this sense in July. Apart from the concerns arising from this reorganisation carried out in bits and pieces, once more the impression is that reforming services barely covers political incoherence.

In practice, so far there has been more concern in defining and implementing exit strategies for humanitarian aid, than in establishing mechanisms that may ensure a continuous support to countries in crisis, thus leaving a vacuum that might have serious consequences. In this sense, the cases of Bosnia and Central America are paradigmatic.

Another example is represented by the lack of any preventative approach. NGOs are strongly advocating for the EC to develop and implement a long-term strategy to

reduce vulnerability in countries prone to be struck by natural catastrophes or on the verge of conflicts.

While no resources are devoted to addressing such problem, the only announced initiative - the Rapid Reaction facility - creates great concern for being a kind of clone of the current humanitarian aid system, characterised by a strong political bias. Where all this will be placed, and how, in the re-organisation is not clear.

Finally, we don't see, in the project, clues indicating awareness of major political problems behind the inefficiency of the EC aid system:

- an irrational breakdown of specific political responsibilities inherited from the colonial past,
- the pathological obsession for multiplication of ex-ante administrative controls dramatically affecting the timing and impact of aid projects,
- the lack of consideration for the best asset Europe can offer in this field: a strong and demonstratively effective system based on civil society through thousands of highly skilled organisations, that have contributed to make of EC the first and best performing donor in International aid.

A doubt remains whether this re-organisation, albeit welcome, was really indispensable. The experience carried out in the last eight years with ECHO, shows that, despite being based on an old system, EC aid can be fast, effective and efficient if certain conditions are ensured and it is placed in the right office.

We have undergone a two-year period of suffering for a badly designed attempt of reform, the SCR, and hope this nightmare will not be repeated this time.

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