

**Simon Maxwell:**

## **‘Opportunities for Europe’**

Simon Maxwell, director of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in London, is one of the initiators of the ERD.

By Ellen Lammers

***You argue that the European Commission should play a bigger role in development cooperation. Why?***

Multilateral aid has always had great advantages in terms of cost-effectiveness and political accountability. The Commission is a form of multilateral donor with features that make it even more attractive, now that the development agenda is changing. Security has become a prominent issue. Some people think that is an excuse to divert money from genuine development spending to interest-driven foreign policy. I think something different. The greatest development challenges are found in fragile regions where traditional aid will not tackle problems that are political in origin. In such regions, coherent thinking is needed to join up aid, foreign policy and sometimes military effort. The Commission has invested in producing regional strategies along these lines.

***But how do you think EU member states can be convinced to yield their sovereignty and let the EU handle this?***

By demonstrating the strength of the argument: that the changing development agenda does favour a European multilateral approach. At the same time, the EU has to demonstrate its capacity to deal with the new reality. The creation of EuropeAid, deconcentration to country offices, agreement on a single EU development policy, the new code of conduct – all these have helped to close the long-standing gap between potential and realization. But policymakers in developing countries still perceive the EU as being overly bureaucratic. And many of us are very disappointed about the line of accountability for EuropeAid and the division of responsibilities between the development and foreign affairs commissioners Louis Michel and Benita Ferrero Waldner. We need a single development commissioner responsible for all aspects of development cooperation.

***You said that 2008 and 2009 offer many opportunities for more efficient EU development assistance. But what about the current economic situation? Will that not provide new obstacles to a more progressive approach to aid?***

We have had a sequence of relatively favourable years for development. Despite that, the Gleneagles commitments have not been fulfilled. We are now faced with the credit crunch, the prospect of a recession and a potential crisis linked to the spike in the prices of oil and of course food. All these problems are, I believe, at the same time opportunities for Europe. The driver of change is often a sense of crisis. Faced with these political problems, our

leaders may well be driven to the EU as one of the answers. Management of the increase in food prices requires very strong collective action and unified intervention by the aid system, but it also links back to the trade discussion. As British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has said, one of the most important contributions we can make to alleviate the food crisis is to secure a Doha trade deal.

***How do you value the role of knowledge and research?***

‘There is nothing so practical as a good theory’ is a phrase by social scientist Kurt Lewin that applies here. We have in Europe the strongest community of development researchers in the world, with strong institutional linkages through EADI. On other side of the table, the Commission has high ambitions to be at the forefront of world thinking on international development. But the Commission recognizes that it does not yet have the capacity internally to be a genuinely ideas-led and knowledge-rich organization. So in theory at least the opportunity appears rather favourable.

***The idea of the ERD is to enhance a European perspective on development. How would the world benefit from that?***

There is a European view of the world that is rather different from that of the US. The US tends to favour hard power; the EU tends to favour soft power. The US is strongly in favour of markets; the EU believes they need to be underpinned by a social infrastructure. My personal view is that concepts like ‘global social inclusion’ and ‘global social justice’ resonate strongly in Europe. It appears a very exciting challenge to take these concepts and transform them into a new paradigm that could inform our international development policy.

If you take a global social justice perspective, you are not only interested in a very arithmetic objective of reducing the number of people who live on less than US\$1 a day. You are also interested in people’s participation in society, their access to decision making. If you are interested in social justice, you’re interested in equal opportunity, but also in a reasonable equity in distribution of outcomes, which is not the same as equality of distribution of outcomes. It is my belief that global social justice as a concept would capture many of the preoccupations of European people and policymakers. The concept can add to the MDG framework and be something distinctive that Europe could bring to the table. ■