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Could 'Policy Coherence for Development' catalyse EU Council Reform?

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The European Union now realises that developing countries are affected by more than just the EU's aid policies. Trade, agriculture, environment, migration and many other policies have an impact, but it seems difficult to take these into account when decisions are being made in these domains. In a nutshell, this summarises the debate on policy coherence for development (PCD), a key concept in the EU's Consensus on Development, the leading policy document in this field.

Not surprisingly, in the context of the EU Council, where a sophisticated division of labour exists for decision-making by 25 EU member states, PCD has led to competition and conflict between several preparatory bodies over competencies and power. The issue raises the question of the extent to which development specialists should be engaged in the decision-making processes of non-aid areas. To what extent should they be permitted to interject their concerns into the business of for instance their agricultural counterparts?

The heavily segmented structure of policy-making in the EU Council has led to a situation where it is difficult to coordinate views or ensure awareness of the relationship between the main issue areas and related topics such as development cooperation. This contradicts the adage of 'the Council is one', as it casts doubt over the ability of EU member states to coordinate their positions and to ensure that common objectives are respected in all decisions. Apparently member states' representatives in different preparatory bodies bring forward different positions and look from a different sectoral viewpoint at the policy problem at hand. They seem to identify more with the specifics of the issue at hand than with their national position in which several viewpoints are coordinated. For them it seems already difficult enough to negotiate a deal between 25 member states without bothering to involve development experts to assess external impacts of their decisions. And they can always argue that development specialists would not reciprocate and make every attempt to incorporate external concerns in their own decisions.

It is true that other political priorities exist and that development concerns are not automatically the most important. However, why formulate such a promising concept as policy coherence for development but fail to follow through in implementing it? How can we hope to achieve the Millennium Development Goals without taking into account the external implications of agriculture, trade and migration policy? The EU is developing the bad habit of setting unrealistic objectives that everyone knows will never be reached, but is this not just the cause of the current legitimacy crisis European policy-makers and politicians are struggling with? Is it also not simply a waste to allow the effectiveness of

EU development policies and aid commitments to be undermined by other policies distorting world markets, export opportunities and the development of local economies?

With such issues at stake, the discussion in the October General Affairs and External Relations Council formation (GAERC) promises to become quite interesting, with on the one hand the Finnish Presidency strongly advocating measures to strengthen PCD and on the other hand the defendants of the status quo. Given that a thorough and constructive debate on this topic would really go to the heart of EU decision-making, policy coherence for development could even become the case study demonstrating the need for reform of the EU Council. Unfortunately, it is unlikely to go that far. Realising this, a recent study by CEPS has recommended modest institutional fixes, such as improving the amount of information available on the development impacts of proposals for EU legislation by expanding the capacity in the European Commission and by strengthening the role of DG Development in internal processes to coordinate different viewpoints. For the Council's preparatory bodies, it suggests creating and expanding expert groups to report on development aspects and installing independent PCD observers in important committees, such as the Article 133 Committee (trade), the Special Committee on Agriculture and the Political and Security Committee.

This could improve the current situation. At the end of the day, however, issues like PCD hinge on political leadership by the EU Presidency, the European Council and the GAERC, where the EU's Foreign Ministers meet. It is up to them to take the responsibility and to ensure a concept as PCD is actually honoured in the EU's decision-making machinery. Furthermore the Committee of Permanent Representatives of the EU member states (Coreper) is key in ensuring that horizontal issues are taken into account by the preparatory bodies before decisions are finalised. Doing this would both be beneficial for the EU's international reputation as well as for its internal credibility. Failure to do this, on the hand, would not pass unnoticed; at least this is to be hoped for.

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