

Interview with Martin Dahinden, Director SDC Switzerland

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Sneak peek: The future of Swiss aid

By [Elena L. Pasquini](#) on 20 January 2012



Martin Dahinden, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation chief.
Photo by: European Union

Switzerland is gearing up for major aid reform: In the coming months, parliament is expected to vote on a multi-year proposal to modernize the country's development cooperation.

Details are still being finalized, but Martin Dahinden gave Devex a sneak peek in December.

As director-general of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, which celebrated its golden jubilee last year, Dahinden oversees an annual budget of CHF1.70 billion as well as some 1,600 employees, including 1,000 local hires in partner countries. In 2010, more than CHF1 billion went to development cooperation and approximately CHF314 million to humanitarian aid; additional funds were used to support the Swiss NGO sector as well as EU enlargement programs and countries in Eastern Europe.

Switzerland's goal is to spend 0.5 percent of gross national income on official development assistance by 2015, Dahinden said. The agency will focus more on fragile states and relief-to-development schemes, as well as public-private partnerships and multilateral efforts to reform partner countries' fiscal systems, to better enable developing countries to raise their own resources.

"The partner countries are as much responsible for the results as the donor countries are," Dahinden told Devex. "If we have success or not with our programs, it only partially depends on ourselves, it depends on the others, and therefore it's important that partner countries have the right ownership."

Here are excerpts from our interview with Martin Dahinden.

What are the cornerstones of the aid reform you're preparing right now?

[In 2012], the government will submit to the parliament a new bill – a four-year bill – with the future orientation. In that context, global issues will play a more important role. By this I mean climate change, health, migration, water and food security. These are, to some extent, five topics where we will develop new kinds of approaches.

A second thing that will change in the future is the work in fragile and conflict contexts. In 2010, we saw at the U.N. MDG conference that in fragile and conflict contexts, almost none of the Millennium Development Goals have been achieved. Therefore, we will put more emphasis on those contexts, increase our spending in those contexts by approximately 15 percent, which is a major challenge for the institution and which, of course, is also something that takes more risk.

You mentioned about prioritizing fragile countries. Will there be changes to your roster of aid-recipient nations?

We have moved out of a series of countries a couple of years ago. It is not the intention to reduce the number of priority countries. On the other side, we are planning to start with programs in Haiti and the Horn of Africa, both highly difficult contexts.

About the Horn of Africa: What lessons should be learned from the ongoing crisis there?

The lesson we have learned is that we have carried out for 20 years now humanitarian operations and we have saved lives, but we did not really change the conditions that turn things to something better. And this is also the reason why we think we should go in this context, basically humanitarian context, and work with development instruments that have more medium- and long-term perspectives. This, I think, is the lesson learned for all the agencies.

So, a stronger link between humanitarian relief and development.

Exactly. In the old times, it was quite separate – the humanitarian and the development actions, to some extent. Now, you see more and more that we have to bring them together. They are something different, but we need to consider more the interrelations.

We have in SDC an advantage as humanitarian aid [and development cooperation are] under the same roof. This is not the case in every country, so it is easier for me, for instance, to come from a humanitarian situation to a development situation. It's already in the same institution, but it is also easier to bring in a humanitarian context in parallel development instruments. But work is still necessary. It is not ideal; not all the problems have been solved.

You stressed that one of the challenges in development work is the need to adapt to new circumstances. What does this mean in practice, at the operational level, in the implementation of your programs?

This is, of course, a major management challenge. A year ago, we didn't know what happened in North Africa, and then the whole crisis unfolded, first with the humanitarian crisis in and around Libya ..., and then the government decision to support also the North African countries in other areas than humanitarian areas. This means, of course, that you have to re-adapt your planning, you have to make re-affectation [a French term for reallocation] of your staff, you have to find sometimes new partners.

Talk about staffing: How will the planned reforms affect hiring?

Basically, most of the people working in the global cooperation [are] specialists in change, and this is something, of course, that remains. But this being said, of course, according to the geographical and thematic contexts, there is an adaptation. We will definitely need more people who are in a position to work in very difficult contexts, fragile and conflict contexts.

What qualities should those who work in such challenging contexts bring to the job?

You can easily imagine how it is when you have to work in Afghanistan or in the Horn of Africa. You need to be stress-resistant. You need to be a person who is extremely flexible. You need a special kind of working methodology: a sensitive project management that enables you to continue with your work planning despite the changes in the political context. This is partially an attitude and partially a skill you can learn.

What is your approach to strengthening civil society in partner countries?

This is done on every level: first, with promoting direct cooperation with civil society, strengthening civil society organizations in the countries in South, but also on a more political level, putting emphasis in multilateral context that the space for civil society needs to be important, needs to be widened. These are issues we would bring in contexts like the discussions we recently had in Busan on the political or policy level, a commitment towards civil society but also in the design of projects.

In the early days of the Paris Declaration [on Aid Effectiveness], the whole focus was on the central government and alignment. That means you align yourself to a government policy. For us, the understanding was always much broader. It's not only the central government level, but also local governments. It's not always the state level, but also an alignment with what happens in the civil society and what is, let's say, the intention of the citizens.

How will the global agreement reached in Busan on aid effectiveness change the way in which you work, from project design to management and reporting?

It will have an impact. I can point out two elements. One is, of course, the closer involvement of partners, partner institutions, in many cases including civil society, in the whole design, in the content of the activity.

The second issue is, let's say, information. We are not providing enough information in the countries where we are active. We are providing a lot of information to the parliaments, to all our domestic control organs, but not so much to the partners. I think this: first involvement, and second accountability towards partner societies. This is an effect that we will see after what has been discussed in Busan.

Interview by Elena Pasquini, DEVEX

[Elena L. Pasquini](#)

Elena covers the development work of the European Union as well as various U.N. food and agricultural agencies for Devex News. Based in Rome, she also reports on Italy's aid reforms and attends the European Development Days and other events across Europe. She has interviewed top international development officials, including European Commissioner for Development Andris Piebalgs. Elena has contributed to Italian and international magazines, newspapers and news portals since 1995.



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Comments posted by Jan Stiefel, IDEAS AidRating:

Another administrative agency announcing policy decisions taken without any public debate- as if they were the Foreign Office themselves. But public debate on policies, and notably development policies- is more needed than ever.

Mr Dahinden says that his agency, SDC, wants to give priority to a combination of humanitarian with long term development projects, and this notably in "fragile states". Which brings us to the centre of debate:

First: mingling humanitarian and development issues together points in the wrong direction: it will not improve results, but rather dilute them. The professional requirements of both are too far apart. It would be better to have separate entities, each with clear priorities, but cooperating.

Second: We already observe a lack in SDC transparency in aid flows as well as in impact monitoring. IATI is still not complied with. Merging the diverging priorities of emergency aid and of long term aid will not improve, but rather worsen transparency. The way to endlessly argue what exactly the priorities will be- and when- will be wide open.

Third: Working in fragile states itself is something for which almost no success monitoring is possible. The risk of failure is high. Failure at an elevated level, e.g. government, can jeopardize all other efforts in the same country. So why go and cumulate risk? SDC should remember the disaster in Rwanda, a "fragile" Swiss "priority" country, where all efforts ended in holocaustic failure in 1994. SDC did not fare well in that catastrophe and does not seem to have learned much.

A brew of all three produces unnecessary extra complexity and risk cumulation. This makes it too easy to find excuses for failures, unsatisfactory results, and other shortcomings. Make no mistake: people to work in those difficult contexts will likely not be bureaucrats from headquarters, but outsiders. And they will be the first to be blamed and fired, if anything goes wrong.

There is another important element which is too often forgotten by aid agencies: Any long term blanket budget attached to a defined country gives the wrong message to possible "beneficiaries" and "agents": "Hey, here comes a lot of money that must be spent, no matter how". And this in countries like Haiti or Somalia? It is an invitation to wastage and worse. Moreover: Disasters and fragility are by definition things that do not go well with bureaucratic four year plans: Where will be the flexibility to cope with the next calamity in the next fragile environment?

Let me put it straight: we of AidRating welcome that Switzerland is increasing its aid spending. But let SDC and others finish their homework on results, transparency (remember IATI), and competitiveness rather than plunging head-on into new problems.

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