

Brussels, June 5 - 6 2018 European Development Days (EDD): How women can transform foreign aid to fight poverty effectively.

The EDD are organised each year since 2006 by the European Commission. They bring together development agents of all horizons : Heads of State and politicians, international and local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), representatives of international institutions as well as journalists and 1200 organisations of all development sectors- human rights and humanitarian aid – coming all from more than 140 countries. Youth groups from all over the world are invited to give their vision of the future.

This year's theme is particularly relevant: « Women and girls at the forefront of sustainable development ». In this framework, our network IDAY (International Day of the African Child and Youth)¹ organised a “lab-debate” on the role of women and girls as promoters of more efficient foreign aid.

The panel comprised several eminent personalities recognised for their defence of the role of women in development cooperation : Hauwa Ibrahim, Sakharov prize 2005, Caroline Heider, Director of the Institutional Evaluation Group and Vice-President of the World Bank, Hendrina Doroba, President of the Forum of African Women Educationalists (FAWE), Heidi Hautala, European Parliamentarian and Assita Kanko, writer and founder of POLIN, and incubator for women from the African diaspora getting involved in European politics. Miss Diwad Samad who represented the EDD youth group, presented her experience with foreign aid in Afghanistan.

“Foreign aid as practiced today not only does not contribute to alleviate poverty in aid-recipient countries but it slows down economic growth and hence the fight against poverty” demonstrated at the onset Jean-Jacques Schul President of IDAY-International and the debate moderator launched the debate. He arrived at this conclusion on the basis of 50 years of professional experience in development financing and extensive reading of the writings by eminent economists and anthropologists among whom several women : Judith Tandler, Brigitte Erler, Dambisa Moyo, Nadia Molenaers, ...

In Africa, like elsewhere, women represent about half the population and contribute more directly to equitable and sustainable development in their communities. Their active participation in the way foreign aid is utilised is hence not only a right but also a necessary condition to improve foreign aid efficiency.

Among the numerous proposals presented by the panel, here are the most original ones:

1. “Connect”: intervene through local communities rather than individual organisations to enhance the capacity of civil society to influence government decisions.
2. “Integrate”: Support functional and inclusive education that meet the needs of the population rather than abiding by donors’ norms;
3. “Empower” : have confidence in the members of local civil society and mothers as carriers of the values to be respected in all activities implying changes ;
4. “Synergize”: bring local civil society closer to their government by investing in the structural support of local civil society instead of seeking to compensate directly government deficiencies.

¹ A network of 600 African civil society organisation regrouped in 19 coalitions to promote quality basic education for all through constructive dialogue with their government.

The issue then is to integrate women more actively in the promotion of the ideas emanating from local civil society. This is precisely the philosophy that IDAY-International advocates with Western donors since its creation.

Responding to questions from the participants, Mrs Ibrahim, Nigerian lawyer, explained that when she was asked to help finding the girls abducted by Boko Haram, she denounced the costly means proposed by foreign donors and instead got the mothers of imprisoned Boko Haram members to get them to help. With emotion, she reminded the participants that education levels are today in Nigeria worse than they were in her youth. To bring about changes, donors should avoid international NGOs that maintain the same lines of action and instead propose solutions with new out of the box partners because from these new partnerships new innovative ideas closer to reality will emerge.

“There are too many workers in the space working on their own” complained Mrs Doroba. Civil society organisations work too much in isolation undermining the capacity of civil society to achieve results. Mrs Heider insisted in recommending “a more collective approach” from the part of civil society.

The deterioration in education quality in Africa – as in the rest of the world – has been denounced by numerous international instances, including the World Bank and is seen by IDAY as an additional proof of the failure of foreign aid. In this regard, Mrs Hautala referred to the damning report by a member of IDAY-Guinea that reveals that only 6% of the girls in remote rural areas managed to finish their primary education. The organisation qualifies African women as « socio-economic slaves ».

Mrs Kanko recommended to build on local strength rather than focussing on weaknesses as perceived by the foreign donors and that do not necessarily correspond to the needs local women consider to be their priority.

In conclusion, to start with, official donors must recognise the failure of foreign aid as it is practiced today, in order for them to adopt innovative ideas involving women. The moderator reminded the participants that numerous conferences have been held since 1970 in Mexico City and that these events deliver more good intentions than action. Hence, he invited the participants to continue the discussion by sending proposals to IDAY (mail: info@iday.org) and also to ensure that groups of African women be systematically integrated in the design, implementation, follow-up and evaluation of development projects financed by foreign aid.

« It is time to move from words to action ».

The IDAY team

Cc : Membres of the Panel, EDD, Heads of main international donor institutions and several bilateral donors. Les coalitions d'IDAY-International, agences de presse.