



## It's time to articulate the Commander's Intent

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This is a second-hand idea, but it bears repeating. The key to leadership is to communicate strategic intent in simple words. In the US army, apparently, this is called the Commander's Intent. John F Kennedy illustrated the principle, when he called on the US to 'commit itself, before this decade is out, (to) landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth'. The instruction was clear, unambiguous, and served to motivate thousands of individuals contributing to a huge and complex project. Bill Clinton's advisers had the same idea: 'there has to be message triage', they told him, 'if you say three things, you don't say anything'.

These examples all come from '[Made to Stick](#)', by Chip and Dan Heath. They come to mind because European development policy appears to be following precisely the opposite advice. Never mind three things being too many. The European Union appears to believe that thirty things are too few.

Consider the development agenda at the last [European Foreign Affairs Council](#) in June. Formally, the main focus was on the EU position for the [UN Summit on the Millennium Development Goals](#), to be held in New York in September. A [twelve-point plan](#) was under consideration, submitted by the Commission in April as its annual '[Spring Package](#)' on development. Twelve points are already more than three, with action points on aid volume and effectiveness, regional integration, taxation and climate change. In fact, twelve points turn out to be many more than three because some of the points are omnibus items – 'policy coherence for development', for example, turns out to cover trade, finance, climate, migration and security, among other things.

However, this is only a beginning. In addition to the twelve point plan, the Council approved an [EU Action Plan on gender equality and women's empowerment](#). It adopted Conclusions on [child labour](#), which in turn contained, buried deep in the text, quite unrelated commitments on corporate social responsibility, the role of the private sector, and trade arrangements under the General System of Preferences. The Council also agreed separate decisions on cross-country division of labour in aid delivery. It passed measures on taxation. It approved [EU priorities](#) for the forthcoming session of the UN General Assembly, covering sustainable development and human rights. It approved measures on the arms trade and an EU Strategy for Central Asia. And it received a [report by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs](#), also covering development-related global issues. All this for action by a Commission leadership team only in office for a few months, and with a major reorganisation to implement when the new External Action Service is finally approved.

The Commission must be gluttons for punishment, because the [forward plan](#) for the rest of the year adds even more to the agenda. There will be a Communication on Climate Change and Development, another on the joint Africa-EU Strategy, one on business for Development, and another on Humanitarian Assistance. There will be a Green Paper on budget support, and two geographical strategies, one on the Horn of Africa and one on Afghanistan. In addition, a process will be launched to review the over-arching policy framework, the European Consensus on Development. There may be another Green Paper on that. Oh, yes, and work will begin on the next European budget, the Financial Perspectives covering the period 2014-2020.

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Which well-known tennis player comes to mind? John McEnroe would be even more concerned about whether the EU were serious if he were to learn that the main policy unit in DG Development consists of six people.

But, really, this cannot be serious. Not only is the Commander's Intent invisible in all this sound and fury, but also the implementation of multiple initiatives becomes impossible to manage. Remember the second part of the quotation from Macbeth: 'Sound and fury – signifying nothing'. Never mind who is supposed to write all these texts. What are the poor field offices supposed to do with them?

It is interesting to speculate on the reasons for overload. Is it over-enthusiasm by Commission fonctionnaires in Brussels? Or political pressure by the 27 Member States and the European Parliament, all of whom must be appeased? Either way, the leadership team in Brussels needs to act decisively. This means Herman Van Rompuy, as President of the Council, and Jose Manuel Barroso as President of the European Commission, as well as all the other Presidents, High Representatives, Commissioners and other panjandrums who occupy space in the Quartier European. As Development Commissioner, [Andris Piebalgs](#) will be the pivotal figure. His track-record is indeed of providing focus and delivering change. A recent [letter to development ministers](#) calls for a new approach.

Here is what he – and they - should do: five steps in service to a single strategic intent.

First, declare a moratorium on all policy initiatives until the Strategic Intent can be articulated in not more than fifteen words. The Millennium Development Goals provide a start, but need to be linked to wider global issues which feature prominently in European development discourse. Note that heads of government are slated to discuss global issues at a meeting in September.

Second, focus first on the [European Consensus on Development](#), as a statement of strategy reflecting the Strategic Intent and covering the work of all European Member State development agencies, as well as the work of the Commission. Do not expect this to take less than six months, but do not allow it to take more. Andris Piebalgs, the Development Commissioner, will lead this work. It will shape the programme of the whole Commission for the remaining four years of their term.

Third, focus next on the capacity of the Commission to deliver its part of the overall development effort. With over 4,000 employees, the development services of the Commission should be well-equipped to manage a large development and humanitarian programme, as well as engage in the trade, finance and security issues which go with a wider remit. Implementing a ten billion euro aid programme is far from trivial, but there are too many people managing the paper-work and protecting the Commission from accounting lapses, too few engaging in wider policy. Far too much of the Commission's core thinking is contracted out to consultants. If the European Commission wants to be seen as an equal of the World Bank or the UN in the development sphere, then radical restructuring will be required. Parliament should demand no less.

Fourth, specific policies should spin-off from the European Consensus, but in a controlled and managed way. The pipeline needs to be managed, across the Commission and not just within DG Development, EuropeAid, the humanitarian administration or the new External Action Service. Any proposal should pass key tests. Is it genuinely additional to the European Consensus? Is it absolutely essential? Is it a proper policy which requires changes in implementation, or is it more of a think-piece? Are there procedures and resources in place to monitor implementation? Most important, perhaps, will Commissioners, parliamentarians and Member State governments have the capacity to process what is proposed?

Finally, management of the pipeline should be transparent and accountable to political institutions. There should be a single statement each year, listing proposed legislative and policy changes. Not a Queen's Speech, but something like it, a programme of action rather than a simple State of the Union: a President's speech, perhaps, if Europe's four Presidents can agree which one will speak.

What is the strategic intent these five actions will help deliver? European development cooperation which leads the world in reducing poverty and delivering sustainable development. That's fourteen words.

The views presented in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI.

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