

(MFI) France launched a reform of its development cooperation policy in 2004. The implementation of the reform plans began in mid-2005 and should be completed about a year later if the remaining obstacles, notably of an administrative nature, can be overcome by then.

"Transparency" and "productivity" are the watchwords of the government's reform plans. Their aims are first and foremost to avoid duplication and waste of resources, at a time of budgetary austerity – which does not seem to impair President Jacques Chirac's proclaimed resolve to continue to increase France's official development assistance (ODA). This has become one of the main planks of the cooperation policy, which is notably geared to combating poverty within the framework of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

A first significant overhaul of the French cooperation set-up took place a few years ago when the Cooperation Ministry was merged into the Foreign Affairs Ministry. A new wave of changes picked up momentum as from mid-2004. Two sessions of the CICID, the Inter-ministerial Council for International Cooperation and Development, in July 2004 and May 2005, laid down the main lines of the current reform.

Cooperation minister as pilot, AFD as workhorse

They include significant institutional changes: the Minister-delegate in charge of Cooperation, Development and the Francophonie assumes a new role as the pilot of French development aid, while a strengthened AFD, the French development agency, becomes the king-pin of cooperation as the operator in charge of preparing and implementing programmes. Secondly, the reform includes a strategic part: it provides for the drawing up of sectoral strategies accompanied by more modern and more selective country by country planning.

The Minister-delegate for Cooperation will thus, under the authority of the Foreign Affairs Minister, oversee the implementation of forecasts and will report to the President of the Republic and the government on progress towards pre-set objectives. The Minister will above all chair the COSP, the Conference on strategic orientation and planning set up in 2004; this body will coordinate the activities of all ministries concerned with development assistance, approve sectoral strategies and partnership framework papers, draw up indicative plans for the allocation of resources by sector and recipient country, and secure coherence between bilateral and multilateral aid programmes based on an assessment of the quality of operations that are carried out.

In the past, the DGCID, the Directorate General for International Cooperation and Development of the Quai d'Orsay, intervened simultaneously in many sectors. To clarify France's activities in this domain, the reform provides for a division of labour by sector. The DGCID will, in the field, look after cooperation concerning governance, justice, police, security, cultural affairs, research and higher education. The AFD will take care of all that has a bearing on economic and social development. The agency, as key operator in the Priority solidarity zone (ZSP) is responsible for all operations in the countries concerned in the domains corresponding to the seven sectoral strategies defined by the CICID: education; water and sanitation; health and combating AIDS; infrastructure development in sub-Saharan Africa; protection of the environment and biodiversity; and private sector development.

The concomitant reform of technical assistance aims at strengthening the role of France Cooperation Internationale (FCI), a public interest grouping, which acts as a recruitment adviser and assumes various tasks in the fields of training, coordination and follow-up. The FCI is also entrusted with mobilising French expertise in response to international invitations for tenders, whatever the source of financing of the projects concerned, and, if need be, in association with research consultancies.

Marie Joannidis

Three questions to...

Jean-Michel Severino, Director General of the French Development Agency

MFI : Is the reform of French cooperation on the rails?

Jean-Michel Severino : All decisions required have been made and implementation is spread between 2005 and 2006. We may say today that all that concerns "project" aid is on track or almost done. In other words, the transfer of these activities from the Foreign Ministry to the AFD. As regards technical assistance, this is something which takes time, for practical reasons linked with the deadlines of contracts, the channels for concluding contracts with our partners, and the need for the FCI to gear up. This public interest grouping is intended to provide French expertise to international organisations – for contracts they finance – and for contracts financed by AFD. We have a seat on the board of this structure. It has to gear up because it will have a more important role than in the past. Given the time needed to do all this, the reform which began in mid-2005 will be completed by mid-2006.

What are the main lines of the current reform?

Firstly, the reform aims at creating a system for piloting France's development aid, organised around the Minister-delegate for cooperation and development – currently Brigitte Girardin – in the shape of a specific architecture: the Conference on strategic orientation and planning (COSP). The Minister is responsible for coordinating this inter-ministerial policy, and is in charge of the development aid mission on the budgetary level, and defends it in parliament.

The second aspect of the reform is the administrative reorganisation – which changes in the roles played by the Foreign and Finance ministries and AFD. The general idea is that the ministries focus on strategic tasks and that AFD takes over the bulk of operational responsibilities, in fact practically all those linked to the achievement of the MDGs. A new convention has been drawn up that will govern relations between the state and AFD. Contracts on the objectives are also being set up between AFD and the ministries. And the statutes are being revamped.

So I now have three, in fact four, bosses: the Ministers of Finance, of Overseas territories, of Foreign Affairs and the Minister-delegate for Cooperation. And it is the Prime Minister who decides... This reform is conceived so as to bring more visibility, clarity and productivity into the system. With a clearer definition of the roles, a better coordination among the players and an effort to redefine the basics through the elaboration of the strategy documents...

What obstacles have still to be cleared?

The main worry is to ensure the efficient implementation of this reform, because it changes many working habits, both at the operational and inter-ministerial levels, and this takes time. There are also obstacles at the level of persons, of the changes to systems, and budgetary problems. It is of course easier to carry out reforms during periods when the economic environment is a more generous one. But the French Chief of state is keeping a close watch on this policy of official aid, which has indeed been protected from the general austerity.

Interview by Marie Joannidis