

Spring Day in Europe 2006



EU aid: how does it work?

Chat transcript

Age group: 14-20

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Guest: [Louis Michel](#), Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, European Commission

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Participating schools

Belgium, Athénée royal de Huy
Belgium, L'abbaye de Flone
Bulgaria, European Club of schools
Czech Republic, Primary School Jablonne nad Orlici
Estonia, Kuressaare Gymnasium
Finland, Secondary School, Tuur
Greece, Secondary School 29, Athens
Latvia, Engure Secondary School
Lithuania, Vilniaus Mykolas Birziska gymnasium
Poland, ZSO Nr5
Portugal, Escola Secundária Francisco Simões
Portugal, Escola Secundária Jacome Ratton de Tomar
Portugal, Secundária de São Lourenço - Portalegre
Romania, Secondary School Corocaiesti Suceava
Slovakia, Obchodná akadémia, Nitra
Turkey, Turk Metal Mustafa Ozbek Primary School

Chat transcript

EUN-Petru Dumitru: Hello everyone! Thank you for registering for today's chat. Our guests, Commissioner Michel and his team, have arrived. Please send your questions.

Latvia20: Good afternoon, Mr. Michel we are honoured to be able to participate in this chat.

Czechrep31: We are happy to be here with you, today!

Turkey31: Hello Mr. Michel, we are happy to meet you at this chat.

Michel1: I am Louis Michel, Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid. I am so happy to have the opportunity to exchange views with students coming from all parts of Europe.

Romania31: Happy to meet you, too.

Lithuania61: First of all, the EU is supporting such countries as Southern Africa, but we can hardly see any results of this support. Could you tell, what are the reasons?

Michel1: We cannot immediately see the results of investing in development in those countries because we very often are obliged acting in emergency in order to have efficient results of development policies. We need time. The progresses are made step by step but without our support, those populations would never have any chance to succeed and even to survive.

Czechrep32: Do you know how many people have you helped so far?

Michel: The European Union is present in all developing countries - 130 countries namely and we are particularly focusing on helping the poorest sections of the population. 1.3 billion people live below the poverty line (1 \$ a day).

Bulgarian32: What are priorities for EU funding?

Michel5: Our priorities are in line with the Millennium Development Goals, as decided at the UU in 2000. Which means reducing by 50% extreme poverty by 2015 (this is people living with less than 1 dollar a day), providing access to primary school to all children, fighting HIV/AIDS, among others. Gender equality is also a priority. More specifically, we

pushed the European countries to increase their Development aid to 0.56% of their GNI by 2010 and 0.7% by 2015.

Finland10: How can we help developing countries as part of our school activities?

Michel2: An interesting initiative would for example be through exchange programmes - your knowledge and experience would strongly benefit the children in the developing countries. If they could come and visit Finland or any other European country, it would certainly be an unforgettable experience.

Lithuania60: What are Lithuanian perspectives in EU?

Michel3: Lithuania is a member state of the EU, so they fully participate in defining the EU policy.

Slovakia40: Good afternoon. How much of its budget does the EU spend on humanitarian aid?

Michel1: For 2005 we had a budget for humanitarian aid of 700 MI euros; and added to that, the possibility of increasing that amount with 200 MI euros coming from the budget reserve for exceptional spending.

Romania31: Why, how and when EU provide external assistance?

Michel2: EU provides assistance to the poorest countries in the world. One of the obvious criteria is therefore the level of poverty. Poverty is defined as daily revenue of less than 1 dollar per day.... EU provides assistance through projects specifically targeted at the poorest, but also through support to the governments in their capacity to deliver the basic functions such as education, health, justice etc...

Czechrep32: How do you feel while helping people?

Michel3: It is of course a great feeling to be working to help the people in developing countries. I have had the occasion several times to visit projects in the field to meet and talk to people that we are working for, and it gives great satisfaction of being the channel through which the generosity of the European citizens finds a way to our friends in Africa and elsewhere.

Latvia22: How can one become a volunteer worker? What age, skills are required? Are women accepted for this work?

Michel: first of all the European Commission takes trainees for five month periods to work within our services in headquarters including in development cooperation and humanitarian. For this the trainee candidates have to apply with the training office of the Commission. Second we are thinking of developing a European volunteer scheme. We are also working with NGOs who sometimes recruit volunteers. And finally we employ junior professional officers for 2 year contract.

Latvia22: Thanks a lot! I'd like to be a volunteer some day!

Czechrep32: Have you ever cooperated with famous people?

Michel3: Many times. Just to give two examples, I have worked with Bono, the singer of U2, and Youssou Ndour, who are both fully engaged in the fight against poverty.

Romania31: Will the EU be able to meet its financial commitments for development?

Michel2: The EU took historical commitments in 2005, both in terms of financing, but also in terms of ambition of results. In terms of financing, the EU promises will be met, otherwise the governments will be held responsible for a failure in reaching the Millennium Development Goals agreed internationally in September 2000.

Turkey31: How many Euros did you send to Indonesia for the Tsunami?

Michel70: I don't have the exact figures here, but we sent in the first instance immediately humanitarian aid and civil protection teams. The commission also coordinates the efforts by the different member states. Afterwards, we also helped turkey reconstruct, in the framework of our cooperation policy with them.

Bulgarian31: Which are the main areas of EU Aid action?

Michel1: The main areas are governance, infrastructures, basic social services as education, health, capacity building for the state.

Latvia22: How are the decisions about humanitarian aid made? Is it connected with natural catastrophes?

Michel2: Of course natural disasters are one of the humanitarian situations where the EU comes in to assist the victims. Other situations are conflicts and refugee populations. As for the criteria, we consider the suffering of the people affected by the disaster or catastrophe.

Lithuania61: Why the support to the strong countries is much bigger than to weaker countries (new members of EU)?

Michel5: Sorry, but we are working with non EU countries.

Turkey31: Why did you stop the financial aid to Palestine?

Michel5: the EU has decided to stop all direct support to the Palestinian Authority, until the Hamas Government recognizes the State of Israel and engages in the Peace process. This does not mean that we stop humanitarian aid and other forms of aid where authorities are not directly involved. We are committed to support the PEOPLE and will continue to do so.

Slovakia40: How do you make sure that the money gets to those who suffer the most?

Michel1: The Commission has implemented a very severe and tough system. It is carried by civil servants of the Commission, but also by external independent audits. It would be very difficult to disrupt European money without being very quickly caught.

Lithuania60: What do you think about Turkey membership in EU?

Michel3: I am sure Turkey can be an excellent member state of the EU. It is a country that has been standing alongside the EU since a long time in a whole series of very important decisions in the past, and I am convinced that they will do the same in the future. Not considering seriously allowing them to become a member would be difficult to explain. Of course, they still have a lot of efforts to do in order to be able to respect the standards of the EU, but I'm sure that the fact of negotiating

Belgium62: Who decides the amount of money allocated to a State?

Michel2: The total amount available to the EU for development cooperation is decided by the European Member States in the budget allocation they make for the general European Union functioning. The amount allocated to the developing country is decided according to a whole series of criteria among which are poverty level, respect for human rights, ambition in projects and governance.

Czechrep32: How many hours do you work every day?

Michel1: At least 15, 16 hours a day

Czechrep31: Do you like your job?

Michel1: Yes I like it very much. I asked for that competence. If I would not have had it, I would not have accepted to be a European Commissioner.

Belgium60: What do you think about Joe Van Holsbeek's case?

Michel5: Joe should be here among us today, chatting with all of us. There is nothing that can justify this awful murder. Once again, I think education is fundamental to prevent this kind of conducts. School is the basis for any society.

Belgium60: The attorney substitute said the murderers of Joe were North Africans. What do you think about this?

Michel: We condemn violence every where and by whoever. I really believe that there is no point in this kind of positioning which can feed racist attitudes.

Romania31: How does the EU implement aid measures in beneficiary countries?

Michel: We check country needs through a programming process and implement measures through public or private actors most specialised the sector.

Belgium62: Do the countries manage to respect the engagements they took with the Millennium Goals?

Michel2: The Millennium Goals are supposed to be reached by 2015. We are still far from reaching them, especially in Africa. With the ambitious commitments made by the

international community in 2000 and latest in 2005, we should be in a position to reach the MDG by 2015.... Let's hope for it!

Lithuania60: What possibilities are for young people to start working in voluntary organizations?

Michel3: There are plenty of opportunities. Many NGO's engage actively in developing countries all over the world, and I am actively stimulating platforms of NGO's in the member states

Lithuania61: Which countries in Africa need the biggest support?

Michel2: Sub-Saharan Africa is definitely the poorest area in the world. Just to give some examples of countries: Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Congo, Sudan, Rwanda and Chad.

Turkey31: Who are the biggest donors of ECHO?

Michel: Last year the EU spent 46 billion euros in developing countries of which 8 billion were managed by the Commission. The EU is committed to further increase this annual amount with a view to reaching 66 billion by 2010, which is a generous and ambitious goal.

Latvia22: How much money do you spend every year?

Michel: Please have a look at the answer we gave to Turkey31

Belgium60: Why is your nickname "Battling Michel"?

Michel1: Because I think I am well known for fighting and committing myself very strongly when I believe in a cause.

Portugal31: Do you think Africa is the continent that needs more help from the EU?

Michel2: Sub-Saharan Africa is definitely the poorest area in the world, and definitely the region needing most assistance, both from the EU and also from all the other donors worldwide. EU is indeed doing the biggest part of its aid to Africa.

Latvia20: We read about your campaign in Malta in April. Will news about it be covered by TV?

Michel5: It was covered by the Maltese TV but there was no other coverage foreseen.

Latvia20: Thanks a lot for your answer.

Turkey31: Did ECHO do anything for Iraq?

Michel3: No, ECHO is not active in Iraq.

Slovakia40: Which are the places in the world the EU focus its help on?

Michel: The European Union attaches particular importance to helping the poorest countries in particular in Africa but also in the Caribbean. We also provide assistance to the countries in the direct neighbourhood of the European Union.

Belgium62: Don't you find it difficult to choose who gets aid? I mean, one decision has a mayor impact in hundreds or even thousands of people...

Michel2: All countries in the world benefit from the EU aid. Under my responsibility, aid is given to Africa, The Caribbean and the Pacific countries.

Czechrep32: Which aid is better - goods or money?

Michel2: both are good, especially in countries where the needs are immense. One thing one should think of: with money the countries do what they consider as priorities, with things, they have to do what we think they want to do.

Czechrep31: Have you ever helped our people in the Czech Republic while flooding?

Michel5: Since the Czech Republic is an EU member state, the aid is channelled through other means, like the regional funds, environment and agriculture funds. Development aid and humanitarian aid are focused on non EU countries.

Czechrep31: Thank you. We got it

Latvia22: How did you become a Commissioner? How many years of work did it take?

Michel1: Well, I was highly interested in development policy because I strongly believe you can only tackle the challenges of the future of humanity with development. I decided

to compete and proposed my candidature to my government. Being deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, my colleagues knew my commitment and my concern for this area.

Latvia22: Thank you very much! I wish you good success in your career!

Romania31: How could volunteers from non governmental organizations offer their help in EU aid?

Michel9: We very much appreciate the activities of NGOs in development. The EU supports many NGOs to allow them to implement their own programmes in developing countries.

Turkey31: As we know the funding of Turkey to Pakistan is more than All Europe, why?

Michel: I suppose you mean economic investment which is very different from public development assistance.

Lithuania61: In what way do you support African countries? What about education in these regions?

Michel3: We support African countries by giving them more than 20 billion EUR over 5 year. A lot of that money goes to education and health because that's where the main and most urgent needs are. Funds for development aid is given to us by the EU member states

Turkey31: As we know Europe didn't want Rauf Denktas (the old President of North Cyprus), and now he isn't President, so why don't you remove the embargo and help North Cyprus?

Michel5: We ALREADY provide funds to Northern Cyprus. As you are probably aware, we supported the accession of a unified Cyprus, but the issue has to be solved within the UN framework.

Turkey31: Thank you Mr. Michel

Portugal2: Do you think that humanitarian help provided to African is enough to solve all their problems?

Michel2: Aid is never enough.... the needs are so immense.

Portugal2: Why is it never enough?

Michel5: In fact, we are increasing our humanitarian aid, channelled through a large number of UN agencies, the Red Crescent and NGOs. For instance, 40 million euros have been allocated to the World food programme for 2006. And we support UNICEF, MSF, Action Contre la Faim, and many others, in Darfur and in Chad too.

Portugal31: Do you think that America helps Africa enough?

Michel2: America is doing its part in the international aid world. One thing should be clear Europe is doing more - a lot more. More than half of the aid is provided by the EU.

Finland10: If we started a partnership with a school from a poor area in Africa: What would you recommend us so that we do not seem patronizing or too rich to them, and we can start a real friendship with the boys and girls there?

Michel3: You can absolutely work directly with them without being patronizing. If you show them clearly that it is your heart that is speaking and if you take the time to listen carefully to what they have to tell you about their lives and about their hopes and about their needs, and then try to formulate your help in such a way that you don't give the impression of knowing things better than them, you are on the right track.

Bulgarian32: How do you monitor the EU AID applications? And are you sure that they reach to the right place?

Michel: We have several monitoring channels and we are accountable to the European Parliament and the 25 Member States. Before starting multi annual programmes, we decide together with the developing countries and with the member States on priorities and selection criteria. Then we work with independent experts to help us in identifying the best initiatives. Regular monitoring is part and parcel of our activities. We do evaluations at the end of each programme and the lessons learnt are fed into the next ones.

Bulgarian32: thank you very much

Lithuania61: In what way do you support African countries? What about education in these regions?

Michel9: Priorities for our programmes in Africa are always identified with together with our partner countries. Education is a priority in many of our cooperation programmes in Africa.

Belgium62: Do you have a good diplomatic relationship with the USA or do they sometimes seem to work against you?

Michel2: We are complementary on the international development stage. The ideas and priorities are not always the same, but the objective, the final goal, is the same. Therefore, we do work together in a constructive and positive way.

Lithuania60: Do you think that African people are skilled enough to work in EU?

Michel5: The question should be slightly different! "Should the people with skills from Africa be forced to leave their countries, where they are so necessary?" or "Do we have the right to carry on a policy of migration a la carte?" I am personally against these practices. I think we have to support lawyers, doctors and nurses, teachers in Africa to work in their home countries, provide training etc.

Lithuania61: How do you fight against diseases in Africa?

Michel1: It is a priority of our development partnership with the African countries. We support financially the actors which are on the ground, as NGOs, agencies of NU, Red Cross, local actors. We also are the main donor in the specific global funds. For instance the EU contributes for 66% in the Global Fund against HIV, malaria and tuberculosis.

Romania31: Why does the Commission propose a common framework for the programming of aid with the Member States?

Michel2: Very simple: in order to gain time and efficiency and to avoid that several donors (Members States) work on the same thing/areas in the same country. If we are to reach the MDGs, we must work together much more closely and be able to share work better.

Belgium62: Isn't it difficult to choose which country gets the most aid? I mean, it must be an enormous responsibility because one single decision has an impact on thousand of human beings

Michel1: No, because the money goes to those who need it the most and who are able to absorb it. The criteria to chose are a mix between performance, and needs.

Portugal31: If America and Europe could forget the debts of the poor countries wouldn't it be a help?

Michel3: It would certainly be a help if the EU, the US and all other donors, also IMF and World Bank, would forget about the debt. We are doing that more and more. But giving up debt is not enough in itself. What will the governments do with the money? That is a crucial issue. This is why we think it is a bit too simple to simply decide to forgive the debt. We need to make sure that we agree with the governments that they will use the money to fight against poverty.

Slovakia40: Do you work with other humanitarian organizations, National or International? How do you choose them?

Michel2: ECHO has signed agreements with a whole series of partners - Non Governmental Organizations and other International Organizations that work in the humanitarian area. They are selected according to their level of professionalism and according to their presence on the field.

Slovakia40: Thank you for the answer.

Finland10: In your opinion, will water be the cause of war in the future if we do not establish the right policies right now?

Michel2: You're right. Water is definitely a source of conflict in some countries and will increasingly become so. All scarce resources can potentially be source of war and conflict. Water can become one. The policies need to be put in place, and as a matter of fact the EU is developing a master plan for developing infrastructures in Africa, just for that purpose.

Lithuania61: How many people are working with you?

Michel70: The Commission has a team of 297 people working for us at DEV, 780 at RELEX, 513 at TRADE, 987 at AIDCO, 172 at ECHO and 4959 in the delegations in the developing countries.

Bulgarian32: If there any social aid in EU which is received by unemployed people, and if there is, what are the conditions to receive them?

Michel5: There is no direct aid to unemployed people as such, but the EU regional funds, for instance, contribute strongly to employment policies, training, support to SME's.

Bulgarian32: thank you!

Czechrep32: Is your job demanding?

Michel1: You must be concerned and able to manage. But first of all, you need political ability to dialogue with the partners, respecting them sincerely. It is also necessary to feel the distress of the people and to have a strong will to share this commitment with the leaders of the public opinion. You must have a fighting spirit to face the comfortable way of thinking of the virtuous saints of rich people.

Czechrep31: Have you got any interesting, funny experience?

Michel1: I was invited by Castro in Cuba. A Harley Davidson Motorbike Riders Club had asked me that I would ask President Castro to recognize them legally. I resolved the problem with the Minister of Foreign Affairs. When I left Castro's office, I was very surprised to be welcomed by two rows of Harley Davidson riders. I decided to ask them to borrow a motorbike. The Cuban body guards and security services were totally distressed. The picture of me riding along the Malecón travelled around the world!

Latvia20: Is that picture of you somewhere in the Internet?

Michel: Yes on the website of the Commission and on my own website.

Latvia20: Thanks we'll go there right after the chat.

Michel5: You can see my picture (and many others, around the globe) on my personal website: http://europa.eu.int/comm/commission_barroso/michel/index_en.htm

Romania31: Are Community agencies and bodies able to assist the Commission in these activities?

Michel2: The European Commission and the European Member States agencies work closely together to provide assistance. Joint training activities and operations in the field are frequent and very positive experiences.

Lithuania61: When did you start working with African countries?

Michel70: When I became the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs in 1999, I immediately started working with Africa, which had been off the agenda of the Belgian government for several years. My first interest went to Central Africa, because of the historical relations my country has with the DR Congo, but I very quickly enlarged the scope of my interest and interventions.

Portugal31: Do you think that Africa will be an economical super-power someday?

Michel5: Africa has the potential to be an economical super-power. It is an extremely rich continent inhabited by poor people! It will take a generation, but it will happen. I am a strong believer and an African-optimist. But it will require better governance, political, economical, social and environmental.

Lithuania60: Why do you give so much money to Africa countries?

Michel2: For a very simple reason: Africa is the continent lying farthest behind to achieve by 2015 the Millennium Development Goals. They need help more than anyone else, we provide them with the help we can.

Latvia20: Do you experience a lot of satisfaction in your job?

Michel1: I have only a very tiny amount of time for my hobbies. I play cards; I like motorbike riding, books, visiting friends, eating.

Latvia20: Thanks, we share the interest in motorbike riding.

Portugal2: How do you see the future of the African children, better or worse?

Michel70: The future will certainly be brighter. Not only has the whole world embraced the importance of making a major effort to help Africa, but the Africans themselves are also more and more coming to grips with the challenges of their continent and the

importance of focusing on women and children. Children are the future of the continent, not only of ours but certainly of the African continent. To meet with them during my field visits and to see the hope in their eyes is most rewarding.

Lithuania61: What are other issues, except starvation, in Africa?

Michel: It is true that there is a lot of misery poverty and deprivation in Africa but it is also true that there are many potential hope and signals of progress. Economic development in Ghana, progress in fighting HIV/Aids in Uganda or democratization in Liberia are all positive developments that need to be better known.

Czechrep31: We have heard that Czech people adopt children in India and support their education, do you operate in India?

Michel9: No we don't work in this area

Czechrep31: Why Africa yes and India not?

Michel: We do development cooperation with India but we do not operate in the field of adoption (nowhere in the world).

Belgium62: How often do you meet to decide about the European aid?

Michel2: The European Commission meets every week to discuss about its work. On a regular basis development is on the agenda. With the developing countries there are European Offices in the countries that benefit from our aid and the meetings are regular. We program our aid once every 6 year, but we revise the aid annually.

Portugal31: What's the poorest country in Africa nowadays?

Michel5: I think the best indicator for poverty is human development index, rather than the GNI. Several countries suffer from extreme poverty: Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Malawi.

Romania31: What is EU aid area?

Michel2: EU aid concentrates since 2000 on the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals. Aid areas depend on the priorities of the countries. We discuss priorities with each country individually.

EUN-PetruDumitru: Time runs out, please send out your last questions. Thank you!

Bulgarian31: There are many floods here in Bulgaria. What do you do about them?

Michel5: Even if Bulgaria is not yet a member state of EU, we are providing help through pre-accession funds and coordinating contributions in terms of civil protection. But this is not my direct competence, it is the portfolio of my colleagues Olli Rehn and Stavros Dimas.

Portugal31: What's the connection between aids and the poverty in Africa?

Michel2: AIDS is a disease that is to a large extent linked to poverty. Why? Because it is a reflection of the lack of education/knowledge, but also of a lack of access to health and medication.

Portugal31: And what are the consequences?

Belgium60: Do you give any support to the United States? We mean for Katrina hurricane?

Michel70: We have offered logistical help, which was appreciated politically, but they finally did not follow up with a concrete request

Bulgarian32: How are you going to achieve one of the EU's main objectives: Advancement of the social right by encouraging countries to ratify the International LABOUR Organization convention?

Michel9: social issues are a part of our policy dialogue with partner countries. We also envisage special trade preferences for countries that ratify and apply international standards in this area.

Finland10: As there is also extreme poverty in our local areas at times, would you advise us that we focused on local problems or that we tried to help poor African countries?

Michel2: Of course we have to do both. At times, emergencies inside the EU justify immediate action from our side. On the long term, our help to Africa will help us reaching a

more stable world, where the inequalities will be less. There is a moral duty in helping the poorest population in the world.

Czechrep32: Do you think the internet is a good recourse of information of humanitarian aid?

Michel: As for all topics Internet provides a good tool to access some information but it is certainly not sufficient. Direct contacts, participation in seminars, etc are also essential.

Romania31: What do you do for affected countries / floods for example?

Michel5: As I replied to our Bulgarian friend, even if Bulgaria is not yet a member state of EU, we are providing help through pre-accession funds and coordinating contributions in terms of civil protection. But this is not my direct competence; it is the portfolio of my colleagues Olli Rehn and Stavros Dimas.

Portugal12: Will the economical problems that Europe faces interfere in the aid policies??

Michel70: that should not be the case. I have lobbied last year with success to get commitment from member states on an increase of their aid between now and 2010, and they have taken these commitments.

Bulgarian31: The United Nations Conference on Women aims at equal rights between men and women. How do you think it can be achieved in the Moslem countries?

Michel2: I think it can - it is all a question of political will.

Belgium60: Have you got some plans for education in Africa?

Michel: Our plans are those of the Millennium Development Goals that is to achieve universal primary education for girls and boys the soonest possible.

EUN-PetruDumitru: Thank you for preparing the questions for today's chat. Our guests, Commissioner Michel and his team, have been delighted to answer your questions.

Michel1: I was so happy to answer very clever and pertinent questions. This shows your concerns about the EU which is the most beautiful political idea of the last century. All those who are interested in extending this first personal contact are invited to send me letters or even to ask me for welcoming them in the Commission are invited to contact me: louis.michel@cec.eu.int

Latvia 22: Thank you to everyone who organized this chat and to Mr. Michel for his time. Greetings to the students of Europe.

Lithuania61: Thank you for your answers; we really appreciate your hard work, good luck to you! :)

Latvia20: Welcome to Riga to World Hockey Championships!

Belgium62: Thank you very much for this nice opportunity! Good luck in your further work!