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TRANSCRIPT

Event

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UNDP in this New Era of Development

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Enoh T. Ebong: Hello, everyone. And welcome to CSIS' 2026 Futures Summit. Today we are examining a new era of development cooperation, one in which the United Nations Development Programme has a role in navigating global crises and building integrated country-led resilience, which is more critical than ever. I am so fortunate to be joined today by UNDP's Administrator Alexander De Croo to examine innovative development strategies that reflect the current moment of shifting geopolitical and economic realities. Alexander De Croo, welcome. We're so pleased to have you here.

Administrator Alexander De Croo: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Ms. Ebong: I know that you were confirmed in your role in November of last year and, you know, began in December. And you jumped right in. You were fairly recently in Gaza, in Syria, and in Haiti – all countries that are experiencing real degrees of stress, significant humanitarian issues, and security challenges. I wonder, you know, what has been your experience in these settings? How in this moment of real change in our development system you feel that we can shape, we can help, we can intervene in these countries? What was your sense of it?

Administrator De Croo: Well, first of all, the three examples you gave are not by accident. This is the majority of the work we do as UNDP. We are active in more than 130 countries. Today more than 60 percent – and if the evolution we see over the past week continues probably even way more than 60 percent – of the interventions we do are in fragile settings. So fragility is really at the core of our – of our work. And that fragility leads to very high amount of human – of human suffering. It also leads to quite some complications on how you do – how you do interventions.

And the first point I want to make is that development is part of hard power. It's not –sometimes it's being said, oh well, you know, hard power is military interventions and is security-related interventions, and then the development part comes afterwards. I think that's wrong. I think that development is hard power. It is – to stay in military terms – it is a form of a preemptive strike. Why you do a preemptive strike in military terms? Well, you do it to avoid that a conflict develops. Development is actually the same.

If you do it right, you can avoid that there is a part of the population which would be in extreme poverty, which often leads to extremism, to corruption, and so on. You avoid that population loses trust in institutions, that institutions erode, that you get into situation of lawlessness with all the consequences that it can – that it can have. And so the examples you gave on Haiti, on Gaza, on Syria, these are places where we have to work with the consequences of fragility. But avoiding that fragility is actually a very sound investment. So the calculation – and I think it's an IMF calculation – shows that for every dollar you invest in development up front, you actually can avoid the cost of dealing with the consequences of fragility, which are more than a hundred times that cost.

Ms. Ebong: How do you see UNDP's role in this, which I think is a very important approach, integrating the notion of development, the action of development, in security?

Administrator De Croo: Yeah.

Ms. Ebong: What is the role of UNDP in actually effectuating that?

Administrator De Croo: So I think, and the first element is on the preventive side, what we will try to work on is policies that lead to prosperity, and there you have to be very tangible. What is one way of showing prosperity or showing progress to a population? It's having a job, and the jobs agenda is one which is – very often for political leaders is a very appealing one.

We have seen throughout the world the last years the Gen Z protests, and the Gen Z protests was very often countries with a young population where that young population says, hey, we're graduating, but where are the jobs? And often, I mean, the job creation is less than 20 percent of the inflow of young people into the labor market.

So we have a big component of what we work, especially with local political leaders, is OK, how can we create a jobs agenda? How can we show that the economy or economic development is actually working to your benefit?

That is on the element of the preventive side. Then in dealing with the consequences afterwards, one of the things that we see is that in fragility and in conflict you have a lot of refugees or IDPs – internally displaced people.

If you want to return back to stability, then recovery, and then rebuild, you need people to come back, and having people come back after a conflict is important in reconstructing a country. It's also extremely important, politically speaking, to keep the support for international protection. We all know that in developed countries, I mean, dealing with refugee flows over the past years has been politically extremely difficult.

And it is an international obligation, but we need to make sure that that international obligation is being preserved but also showing to those countries that, you know, yes, you have an obligation for international protection. But when conflict is over, people go back to their countries and people should be incentivized to reconstruct their countries.

Now, people are very willing to go back, but they will only go back when certain basic services are there. You cannot expect people to go back when there is no health care, when there is no schools, when there is no basic infrastructure, when there is no access to energy.

And that, for us, is a big part of what we call early recovery, is together with donors and with local political leadership restoring those services. And there are success stories. If you look at the stabilization of Iraq the last years, millions of people have gone back to Iraq.

Millions of people within Iraq have gone back to their home region. That is because we restored services. So making what we do, make it very, very tangible in a situation of fragility and a situation of insecurity can lead to very tangible results.

And there is many examples – there is examples of things which have not worked. I would rather focus on what has worked. Iraq is an example where it has worked.

The Lake Chad Basin is an example where it has worked and today, to me, Syria is an example where it could work and is an example where we could show that in a country where we would have said five years ago it's kind of hopeless, today, this is one of the places in the world, despite all the complexity in the region, where we can show, look, things might actually go in the right direction.

But it will not go in the right direction if the international community is leaning back and is saying, well, let's wait a year and see what happens. I mean, if you do that, then we will prove that it's not working.

Ms. Ebong: I think it's so important that you point to the successes and the narrative of what has worked. I think I also picked up from what you just mentioned the importance as much of security to include both, sort of, national security but economic security. That fundamental of jobs, of a livelihood, of an environment in which you can not just survive, but thrive in your in – your own country.

Administrator De Croo: It's a crucial element to have jobs, but also jobs that provide. So jobs that lift you out of poverty. That is not a guarantee these days. I mean, there's millions – hundreds of millions of people who work today but who still remain in poverty. So and to increase that income you have to look at pure economics. I mean, if you want to increase income of workers, you need to increase their productivity. Increasing their productivity means giving them access to technology. So jobs – if you want jobs that are an economic engine, you need to use technology to increase the productivity.

That leads to an income where you have a surplus. When having a surplus from a salary, that's the key to everything because then you can start saving. If you start saving you have access to a financial system. If you have access to a financial system and you save, you can borrow. If you can borrow, then you can construct a future. And then the economic engine gets going. So the element of productivity and using technology to improve the productivity of workers, wherever it is in the world, is a crucial element.

Ms. Ebong: Well, can you say a bit more about technology? Because I think this is crucial. And you have focused on it, both as a way, perhaps, that UNDP can do its work effectively, but also in terms of the development system and how it can be brought to bear in a way that does not increase a digital divide, in a way that does not exacerbate the positions of those who have and those who have not. Can you talk a bit to that?

Administrator De Croo: Sure. There's a lot of talking about how, for example, the evolutions in AI could create a bigger digital divide. That risk is there. But let's analyze it one level further. What is a fundamental reason that that would happen? It's not because technology would not be accessible to, let's say, least developed countries. It's because of policy reasons. I mean that technology is not flowing there, very often because the legal environment is not stable. Not stable to do, for example, the investments in datacenters that are – that are needed. Or the mobile communication networks are not there because, well, the legal stability or the financial stability is not – is not sufficient.

So I hear the people who warn for the divide. Our reasoning is, OK, but let's work on it. Let's work on the things that we have in our hands. And what we have in our hands is policy reforms, is working together with local political leadership that understand that they have to put their political capital in that. And there is work. I mean, if you look at today in developing countries, only 25 countries in the category of developing countries are investment grade. And actually, if you look between 2020 and 2025, Standard & Poor's lowered the rating for 35 countries in the category of developing countries. So these are statistics that are undeniable and show that there is an incredible amount of work to make countries' markets investable.

Now, that might sound very capitalist reasoning. But making countries investable is the basis for creating a middle class. A middle class of entrepreneurs that see the needs of their population, that provide economic solutions for the needs of their population, that create jobs, jobs have an income, and all the positive effects that it can – that it can have. So we are a big believer of technology as an enabler of development. And as technology as something that can increase the productivity of very young populations, but that can only happen if the boundary conditions to make those investment happens are there.

And today – there is no lack of capital these days. I mean, here at the spring meeting, you go in discussions with multilateral development banks or you go into a discussion with the World Banks and the others, they're not in lack of capital; they are in lack of investable projects, and that's the real discussion. So, yes, we see the cuts in official development assistance. Yes, all that is true. But the real discussion is what is available as investable capital, how do you make the projects investable. That, to me, is the real – the real endeavor.

Ms. Ebong: I do agree with that, and it's a – it's a conversation that we've been having for a while but have not been able to move appreciably on. I so underscore the importance of the investable environment, because actually it makes an environment livable and economically sustainable for everybody.

Administrator De Croo: Exactly.

Ms. Ebong: It's not just about business.

Administrator De Croo: Totally.

Ms. Ebong: But you mentioned ODA and the decline of official development assistance, so maybe we can touch on that for just a little bit. Obviously, the decline has been steep, I think 21 percent or so, from that.

Administrator De Croo: Yeah.

Ms. Ebong: I think that was more than what had been anticipated in 2025. How has this and how will this affect the way in which UNDP approaches its work, its partners? How are you partnering with others, perhaps the private sector, philanthropy? Can you give us a sense of the interconnection from UNDP's perspective of the – of the reductions that we've seen in the last couple of years?

Administrator De Croo: So the reductions we've seen, obviously, we deplore it, because we see massive reductions. I think it's between 21 and 23 percent. Those reductions we see at a moment where today the needs for investment in development are actually increasing in a very sharp way. So in one week('s) time you see the statistics of the drastic decrease, and we have a report that came out today that shows that those six weeks of war that we see in the Gulf region has a risk of pushing 32 million people back into poverty. So going down there, going up on the other side, yes, that shows the issue that we – that we have. OK, that's the analysis.

Now, what does it mean and how do we cope with it? If you look at the streams going into developing countries, ODA is one element in it but there's many other streams. Remittances are in volume three to four times as big as ODA. That's the first element. Foreign direct investments is even more important as a – as a flow. So to me what is crucial is: How do you use ODA? How do you use public funding? And we have to be extremely, extremely selective and extremely cautious on what do you use it for. To me, there's two categories.

First of all, you use it in those domains which you cannot finance with anything else. Let's say investing in governance and in organizing elections, it's hard to get other types of financing for it. And actually, you don't want – I mean, you don't want foreign direct investment into organizing elections in a – in a country. So that's one category. There are certain things where, look, that can only be done with ODA, and you have to be very clear on that.

Second element is what you would call catalytic investment. I mean, these are investments in policy reforms to create an environment that makes it much easier for private capital to flow. So let's be very, very selective on how we – on how we use it. And for us, this means that we have a few avenues where we see more work happening.

One of them is working closely with key international financial institutions. They very often have conditions before they can disburse. We need to stand on their side and say, OK, we are going to work with countries to make sure that the conditions you put before you disburse your loan are not just conditions on paper. I mean, what we do is we turn conditions on paper into practice, into things that are being realized. That's to the advantage of everything because it will increase investment that is happening that the World Banks and the others are doing, which are crucial. That's one big element.

Second element is domestic resource mobilization. I mean, in many countries, even the poorest countries, there are people who make money. And there's nothing wrong with making money. But there's nothing wrong either about paying some taxes on the profits that you have. And especially in domains such as natural resources and others, we have nothing against the fact that there is an economic activity around natural resources. It's one of the strengths that many of the poorer countries have. But they need to be way stronger at, on one hand, fighting corruption, but on the other hand also making sure that people who do make money pay a contribution with which governments can organize their own direction.

And then very often, and that's a third element, we see that more and more we work as a development organization with the money that the country provides themselves. That's what we call government development finance. We do that in DRC. We do that in Argentina. It's basically with the money of the country itself we implement certain types of programs. Which is, today, almost 25 percent of the volume that we do. And it's actually one of our preferred options, because it's – the core of political ownership is when, as local politicians, you set the direction, but you also do it with your own – with your own financing.

So I give these examples to show that the nature of development work has been changing quite a bit over the last year. So, yes, the reduction in ODA has an impact, but it definitely does not mean that it's the end of development. I mean development is moving rapidly away from the classic aid agenda to an investment agenda, to a local leadership agenda, which I think is actually – which I think are actually quite healthy characteristics.

Ms. Ebong: Can you speak a little bit – because I think you sort of alluded to it in the government development financing that you just mentioned – what do you and UNDP expect of your – the countries in which you are working? I ask this question, of course, because in the last year we have heard much on sovereignty from – I think it's come mostly from Africa. The notion of, look, we own our nations. We own our budgets. We do need to be fiscally responsible. It is a very defined and quite active call. How do you receive that? And how might it, or maybe not, but how does UNDP leverage and work with partner countries or developing countries in this kind of context in this moment?

Administrator De Croo: We enthusiastically welcome that. Development goes well when you have local political leaders, who represent their population, who need to give accountability towards their population on what their population expects from a development – from a development perspective. And I think it's a very healthy – very healthy agenda for us to work. And we have in – we have in 130 countries very long-lasting relationships by being there. I mean, UNDP has been there, is there, and will continue to be there. And that local ownership, that local contact, for us, is a crucial way of doing our work. And, in working together with them, in realizing – in realizing results.

You mentioned the African continent. To me, one of the most hopeful things that I see on the African continent is the Africa free trade zone. And as a development minister – I mean, I was Belgian development minister in the past – one of the most heartbreaking things I saw on the African continent is countries that, for example, have food production. And exporting it from one country to the neighboring country was more complicated than importing vegetables from Northern Europe into sub-Saharan countries. That always broke my heart, because I'm a big believer in trade. And, I mean, as a European, we are a product of the increased trades on the – on the European continent after a devastating war. At some point, European countries understood, OK, if we trade with each other this is going to boost our prosperity.

The potential for intra-African trades to be an incredible engine of prosperity, of middle-class class creation, of small-business creation – I mean, that potential is a huge one. And it's so hopeful to see that there is a dynamic there, and UNDP is actually a close contributor to that dynamic of the African free trade zone and agreement – that if there is something I would say, well, let's put some hard-fought ODA or public spending into accelerating that. To me, that is one of the most hopeful, hopeful elements that I see in the world today in a continent which will rapidly represent almost two-and-a-half billion inhabitants.

I mean, the population growth on the African continent is a huge one. Up to now, many people saw it as a problem. There's definitely challenges with it. But to me, the dominating element is, yes, this is going to be a market of two and a half billion people with needs but also with talents and with ambitions. Bringing that together by integrating the African continent is something I'm extremely hopeful on.

Ms. Ebong: I do – I completely agree with respect to the African continental free trade area is one of great possibility and I think will be a very great demonstration of the sovereignty that African countries are talking about.

Practically speaking, from your perspective, both as a former development minister, what are some of the practical steps that need to be taken to actually get this into implementation?

Administrator De Croo: On the African continental free –

Ms. Ebong: On the African continental free trade.

Administrator De Croo: So there is a big element today on the digital element of it, and we talked about the lack of intra-African trade. On the digital component it's even worse, and in a continent with such a young population with huge needs and where in many countries you can more or less start from a blank page, the potential for digital being an incredible enabler and an incredible factor of lowering barriers to entry for people to participate in society, to participate in government services, to participate in the economy is a great one.

But for that, you need some basic what we call DPI, digital public infrastructure. Identity authentication is a big one. Now, we have been doing this in a few African countries and that is good for the economy, but it's good for many other things, and if you want to organize elections, very often, to say in French, "le recensement" is always a big discussion. OK, but who's entitled to vote and how do we make sure that people don't vote two times and so on? So that digital public infrastructure of authentication is a major one with many benefits.

Our payment systems were actually in the edge of development in mobile payments. It did not start in the Western world. It started with M-PESA in Kenya and in Tanzania and so on.

I mean, you see that and that makes me hopeful that the innovation today is happening all over the world. It's not only happening in the rich countries. It's not only happening in those countries which, with tradition, are being seen in leading technology and the potential for adapting it to the needs, and those needs are different of that young, ambitious, talented African population.

I'm actually very hopeful on that. But you need some kind of cornerstone investments that are catalytic to having other things happen.

Ms. Ebong: Yeah, I agree. I think we're, unfortunately, coming to the end of our time together. I'd like to close with a discussion about trust.

Administrator De Croo: Yeah.

Ms. Ebong: You have emphasized trust and the need to build it. Yet, we are in a moment of complete disruption and lack of trust in many ways. What will it take to rebuild trust? Because I think it's a grave necessity. Trust in the international system. Trust in the ability to partner and collaborate.

How do you approach this issue? I also think, and I'd like to throw in as well, how we communicate and talk about it, because we have to bring people along. We have not done so so successfully.

I'm really interested in your perspective on this.

Administrator De Croo: OK. You cannot talk the mistrust away. So there is a certain level of mistrust – and let's be frank about it – in multilateral institutions, in what sometimes is called "the elite," in the fact that the economy should be serving the population. You can't talk that away. The only way you can tackle that mistrust is with delivery. And that's where we get our trust back. As U.N. in the broad sense, but as U.N. development system, it's with delivery on the ground that you, step by step, take it back.

And trust is something that goes away at high speed. Rebuilding it takes time. But for us, it's to show that when there is a crisis, we are there rapidly, and we are there with our surge forces to immediately help people out. I was recently in Jamaica. Jamaica is a country that has an incredible – has had an incredible development. But when Melissa hit, yes, all those hard-fought progress is just being washed away. We need to be there to immediately assist them, and to immediately not only do humanitarian work, but to reconstruction from the start. And that – so that is one of the elements on how you show it. And then it's to show that, you know, we deliver. It's not always perfect. I think sometimes you need to be open and say, look, we tried this. That didn't work. But you're transparent on we're not trying to cover up certain things.

And maybe to transition it to the conflict that we see in the Gulf region today, we've made the calculation that those just six weeks of war is pushing 32 million people back into poverty. And I say "back into poverty," because very often those are people that actually we lifted out of poverty. And what we see is that development is something that you build week, month, year by year. And it takes years to lift people out of poverty. It takes six weeks of conflict to wash it away. And that's heartbreaking for all the efforts that has been put in it, and for all the hard work especially of the local staff and local population who have worked it.

But despite that, our perspective at UNDP is, OK, let's get to work. And what can we do now to show that we are trustworthy? Well, of course, we'll advocate for the end of the war. That's point one. But, secondly, if you want to avoid that – what I just said, the development is washed away in six weeks, you need to intervene now. And you need interventions which are targeted to that part of the population that really needs it. Those are cash interventions. Those are subsidies on energy costs. Those are interventions in fertilizers to make sure that developing countries can still have access to it. So what can we do? Less talking and more action.

Ms. Ebong: That's a perfect note on which to end. Administrator De Croo, thank you so much for joining us today. And to the audience, thank you for joining us. I think we've seen the UNDP is continuing forward with vision, with action, and with the promise of delivery. Thank you for joining us.

(END.)