

Antón Leis, Director of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID)

Born in Santiago de Compostela in 1981. Married and father of two children. Antón Leis has an extensive career in the field of international development and multilateral affairs both in international organisations and the Spanish government. Prior to his appointment as AECID Director, he held several positions at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) both in the Global Relations Secretariat and the Office of the Secretary-General. Most recently, Mr. Leis García was Counsellor to the OECD Secretary-General, with the rank of Head of Division.

From 2018 to 2020 he was Senior Advisor at the General Secretariat for International Affairs, EU, G20 and Global Security of the Cabinet of the Spanish Prime Minister, where he coordinated the participation of Spain in the G20 and was responsible for other multilateral dossiers. He also worked as an advisor to the Secretary of State for International Co-operation. As a development practitioner, Mr. Leis García specialised in economic governance, competitiveness and private sector development. He worked at the African Development Bank as a Senior Governance and Private Sector Specialist in Tunisia and Côte d'Ivoire after joining as a Young Professional. He also worked at the World Bank in Washington DC as Legal Counsel covering the Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean regions. Mr. Leis García holds a Law Degree from Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, a Master of Laws (LLM) Degree from Harvard Law School and a dual Master in Public Administration (MPA) Degree from the London School of Economics and Sciences Po Paris. In addition to Spanish, he is fluent in English, French and Portuguese.

AECID is a key actor in development cooperation at a time of great challenges at the international level. What is your assessment of the context and the main challenges that remain?

The world is going through one of the most complex moments in international relations in recent decades, a period of simultaneous and overlapping crises in which the global consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have been compounded by the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East. Humanitarian needs are multiplying year after year, the reduction of poverty in the world was halted during the pandemic, inequalities are increasing and the climate emergency is pushing many people into hunger and exclusion. And all this while voices are emerging that advocate identity withdrawal and question multilateralism or the rules-based international order.

In this context, cooperation is more necessary than ever. No country, no matter how powerful, can solve these challenges and crises alone. The pandemic has shown us that.

Cooperation is, now more than ever, an exercise in solidarity but also in responsibility; it is not an expense but an investment. This is about values, but also about interests. We have one of the most supportive societies in the European Union – 4 out of 5 Spaniards support investment in cooperation – but it is important to stress that this is a job. It is not in vain that cooperation is a fundamental tool of our foreign policy, of what is known as ‘soft power’ that allows Spain to build alliances with other actors and influence global debates and that, ultimately, results in the well-being and security of our citizens here at home.

That is why, while some countries are reducing their commitment to cooperation, Spain is among those that are firmly committed to it and strengthening it. **The new cooperation law**

of 2023, adopted with a large political consensus, put forward a broad reform of Spanish Cooperation with the AECID as the 'cornerstone' of the system. Since 2021, we have doubled the Agency's budget and launched new and innovative programmes, but, above all, we have committed to making cooperation more effective, with greater impact, more strategic and aligned with a coherent foreign policy with its own identity that states the same thing in Palestine and Ukraine.

The reform of the system and of AECID and the way in which we are carrying it out, with dialogue among all actors and based on solid principles, is a fundamental achievement in these times. The reform will allow us to grow and respond to the ever-increasing humanitarian and development needs and also to show our partners in the world that we will not abandon them, moreover that Spain is a reliable actor that practices a new type of cooperation, less based on the logic of 'aid' and more on the logic of partnership to solve shared challenges.

This reform was conceived and has broad social and parliamentary support, and this is our challenge: to continue strengthening this policy, which is both a public policy and a State policy, with responsibility, growing to respond to needs that sometimes seem to overwhelm us, but doing it well.

A new AECID Statute has recently been approved, which culminates the process initiated with the new Law on Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Global Solidarity, and which represents, as you say, an ambitious reform of Spanish Cooperation. What are the main changes it introduces and how will they strengthen the Agency's impact?

The new Statute of the AECID, approved last December, is the core of a profound reform of an AECID that wants to be an innovative, agile and strategic agency, a benchmark on the international scene. The reform essentially pursues four objectives.

First, we want to renew the organisation to respond to the new needs and challenges of the new international environment. Therefore we are committed to strengthening sectoral knowledge in areas such as feminist cooperation, ecological transition, inclusive economic growth and digitalisation. And to strengthen strategic instruments, such as humanitarian action (which we have almost tripled since 2018), education for development & global citizenship, or financial cooperation, which will be essential to cover the annual financing gap of the SDGs, which is 20 times more than official development aid worldwide.

Secondly, we want to change our way of working from a form of cooperation focused on our own projects and programmes to one in which the AECID, in addition to its own capacities and actions, devotes more effort to promoting and managing alliances with other cooperation actors (civil society, private sector, multilateral partners, regional and local cooperation actors) and with partner countries.

Thirdly, we want to focus on people. Not only for the communities that benefit from our projects, but also for our greatest asset as an organisation: our staff. We need to attract the talent of highly qualified staff for the challenges of the future. In July the Council of Ministers approved the new Statute for Aid Workers, which dignifies and improves the working conditions of this fantastic professional career and offers new rights and better career prospects to the more than 2,700 aid workers we have around the world defending our values. In the near future we will be launching a new call for AECID project managers designed to attract highly qualified young people who want to work with us for a better world.

Fourthly and finally, we want to strengthen the Agency's agility and efficiency in order to respond to the challenges of an increasingly complex world, and provide it with greater flexibility and dynamism, reaffirming its commitment to the continuous improvement of knowledge management, learning and innovation. This is why we have a Technological Transformation Plan that seeks to improve interaction

with citizens and is firmly committed to making digital technologies a driving force behind development.

The reform also addresses coordination with the private sector. How do you see the role of the private sector and institutions such as the BBVA Microfinance Foundation in this new cooperation model?

The private sector is absolutely fundamental, indispensable I would say. It is essential from the point of view of financing: without sustainable investment in emerging and developing countries we will not be able to make progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda. Our challenge as cooperation agencies is going to be to encourage financial markets and investors to channel more resources towards sustainable development, towards climate finance, towards a digital transition that leaves no one behind, towards the generation of quality employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for all and, if I may say so, above all for all women.

Working with the private sector and with actors working in the field of financial inclusion or impact investment is also of interest to us for the knowledge and innovation they bring. It is not all about finance. Many farmers around the world could change their lives and those of their families with new farming techniques. There are many entrepreneurs in developing countries who just need a little push to generate opportunities around them and transform their countries.

The new law and the new Statute of the AECID require us to do two new things. On the one hand, we need to coordinate our cooperation system at the operational level in an increasingly diverse context of cooperation actors. On the other hand, we need to imagine and create alliances with them, often coordinating and supporting other actors financially and technically, mobilising Spanish science or our private sector in favour of sustainable development, or exploring opportunities for co-financing and joint work with organisations such as the BBVA Microfinance Foundation, which has a great track record of work in Latin America promoting entrepreneurship and financial inclusion, two objectives that unite us both.

To give you a figure: approximately half of the operations we approve each year through our reimbursable cooperation arm are operations with the private sector, specifically financing impact investment projects with private investors who want to have a return in addition to the purely financial one.

Latin America is a region of great contrasts. What are AECID's priorities in this region?

Cooperation with Latin America and the Caribbean has been a priority for Spanish cooperation since its beginnings. That is where we were born and where we learned to cooperate, and we continue to do so hand in hand with our partners.

The Law on Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Global Solidarity refers to the concept of development in transition, which is of great interest for this region, where most of the countries are middle-income and continue to require accompanying strategies to address the challenges they face regardless of their income level: inequalities, climate risks, gender gaps.

AECID's priorities in Latin America and the Caribbean are to contribute to social cohesion and the reduction of inequalities; to promote climate action in a region with great assets such as biodiversity but which is highly exposed to risks such as droughts and floods; to support regional integration, which has great potential to generate prosperity; to strengthen democratic systems and human rights, which we Latin Americans and Europeans share as fundamental values; to promote sustainable investment and its impact on development through the EU's investment agenda in the region (where AECID contributes up to 1.4 billion euros); and to actively participate in the Ibero-American cooperation system, of which we have been the pro tempore secretariat for the last few months until 2026.

In your opinion, how can microfinance and entrepreneurship contribute in a sustainable way to poverty reduction?

Microcredits, an idea born decades ago in an emerging country (Bangladesh, thanks to Nobel Prize winner Muhammad Yunus) are a very effective financial instrument for the eradication of poverty and for the construction of a sustainable economic fabric adapted to practically any model of society. In societies with high rates of inequality and where the gap in access to financing is unbridgeable, these are solutions that boost self-employment, the integration of people into the labour market (especially women and young people), the generation of new and innovative business models, and, therefore, in the economy and social cohesion, making this form of financial cooperation a powerful instrument in the fight against inequalities, as well as contributing to the resilience and economic growth of society as a whole.

Gender equality is a priority for AECID: What strategies are you implementing to promote the economic empowerment of women in developing countries?

Gender equality is a hallmark for us. It is, of course, a priority sector, but it is also a transversal axis that inspires all our actions and programmes under a feminist approach.

The current Master Plan for Spanish Development Cooperation 2024-2027 reinforces this commitment by making equality a priority sector and establishing the objective that at least 60% of initiatives should contribute directly to equality, with a goal of progressive growth towards 85%.

We are already on track. Since 2021 we have almost tripled our investment in Sustainable Development Goal 5. Our action follows four strands of work on gender equality, all of which are necessary to advance women's empowerment in all areas: women's full participation in decision-making at all levels, including in the political sphere, women's economic empowerment, the elimination of all forms of gender-based violence, health and sexual and reproductive rights.

As a result of our feminist commitment, in 2021 we launched a global programme called Ellas+, which has an annual budget of €5 million, and continues to promote women's leadership at all levels of society and to foster equitable care systems.

What message would you like to send to the entrepreneurs who, in contexts of poverty, despite the challenges, continue to drive the progress of their families and communities?

A message of support and commitment. Entrepreneurship is not only the engine of any economy, whatever its size, it is also a powerful vehicle for thousands of families to lift themselves out of poverty and to contribute to social cohesion. Even in Spain, according to data from the National Statistics Institute (INE), micro-SMEs account for 94% of all businesses in the country. Entrepreneurs are the backbone of our economy and, in many emerging countries, their role is even greater.

The impact of entrepreneurship in these countries, with huge rates of inequality and serious obstacles to access to finance for the majority of citizens (and particularly women and some excluded groups), makes it an effective tool, perhaps the most effective tool, to generate decent employment, reduce informality and promote more competitive and inclusive economies. The creation of opportunities for the development of this often informal economy generates an undoubtedly positive impact by generating wealth in families and communities, fostering competition and even encouraging investment, thus creating virtuous circles for the country's economic development.