

## 6. Public support for international development cooperation

By: Patrick  
Develtere

HIVA

### The unbearable lightness of public support for traditional development cooperation

In the span of fifty years development cooperation has become a highly specialised sector spending over 100 billion € a year. Notwithstanding its impressive track record<sup>1</sup>, the traditional development cooperation sector is facing an unprecedented crisis. This crisis has much to do with the inability of the sector to deal with new challenges such as global environmental degradation, rising insecurity and severe distortions in the international market that minimize or even annihilate development cooperation efforts. Paradoxically the sector itself, policy-makers and the population at large are looking at the development cooperation sector to solve these problems as well while – at the same time – traditional development cooperation is being criticized for being too-little-too-late, ineffective, inefficient, incoherent, uncoordinated, non-transparent, unaccountable and even illegitimate.

Much of this crisis is thus related to the unbearable lightness of public and political support for traditional development cooperation. But why do we continuously refer to the “traditional development cooperation sector”? Because a new and promising type of cooperation is emerging. This new and modern mode of development cooperation is seriously challenging the traditional actors of development cooperation.

#### 1. The traditional development cooperation community: challenge 1

The development cooperation community is composed of what we have called three “pillars”. The first pillar refers to the donor-agencies responsible for official development aid (e.g. USAID in the U.S., DfID in the U.K., DGIS in the Netherlands). The gamut of specialised multilateral agencies such as UNDP, the Worldbank or EuropAid form the second pillar. Civilateral development agencies such as non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs) and certain foundations are the third pillar. The thousands of agencies that belong to these pillars and this development cooperation community were created because of the development problems. They are domain-specific and specialised. They share common credo’s (“we can change the world if all donors invest 0,7% of GDP in ODA”), common values (“solidarity”), common ideas (“not-for-profit”), common discourses (“pro-poor growth”), common vocabularies (“ownership”, “empowerment”, “participation”, “target group mix”,...) and common practices (“participatory appraisals”, “project cycle management”, “budget support”,...). For a decade or so they have been working on a common agenda epitomized in the MDGs and the Paris Declaration.

This traditional development cooperation community is hermetically closed and self-referential. For outsiders it is hard to join the club and the members of the club itself have little feeling with the vibes of the communities outside. Still, all public opinion barometers show that the population at large in

---

<sup>1</sup> Although this is a much debated issue, development cooperation has had great impact in such fields as health, education, support for democratisation, opportunities for civil action, etc. To deny this would be proof of historical short-sightedness.

## PAPER

### Public support for international development cooperation

western countries largely supports the development cooperation specialists: “poverty has to be tackled, development cooperation is needed, NGOs do a good job,...”. But this support is extremely and increasingly volatile both in terms of opinion and financial support. This support is also increasingly conditional. There is a growing call for accountability and proof of effectiveness. Remarkably the dictum ‘unknown makes unloved’ does not apply this time. Research shows that the public has little or no knowledge of who is who in the development cooperation sector and does know little or nothing about the recent trends and strategies of the sector. But support for “the small water and sanitation projects; for the health clinic and the school; for the Dutch aid worker” is high.

Simultaneously a new pillar is emerging. We called this “the fourth pillar of development cooperation”<sup>2</sup>. In the U.S. over 50 government agencies, ministries and departments are involved in some kind of development cooperation. In Belgium all ministries do have a budget for development cooperation activities. All donors are confronted with a “pluralisation” or “fragmentation” of their official development aid (ODA). At the level of the U.N. efforts are being made to “Deliver as One” in order to get control over the unbridled expansion of development cooperation efforts of tens of existing agencies and the proliferation of new agencies, funds and alliances. The NGOs then are confronted with new “civilateral” initiatives of individuals (“self-made aid workers”), but more importantly of other civil society organisations and movements such as schools, trade unions, farmers’ organisations, human rights organisations, environmental NGOs, foundations, health care institutions, migrant communities, sports clubs, businesses, and so on.

Characteristically these fourth pillar organisations are not domain-specific. They were not created because of the problems in the third world or the North-South divide. They are children of the age of globalisation. They are not part of the development aid community (very few long for it), they do not take over its credo and values<sup>3</sup> in a wholesale manner, do not understand its discourses and highbrow vocabulary. Their logic of intervention does not stem from the development community either. They know how to act as school masters, as trade unionists, as sports people or as entrepreneurs. They do it back home. They feel they are good at it. So why couldn’t they do it elsewhere, together with their colleagues from Botswana, Belize or Bangladesh?

#### **2. the traditional development cooperation arena: challenge 2**

The development cooperation sector is not only a community of fellow travellers. It is also an arena or even a set of arena. There are arena in the donor countries, in the recipient countries, in the projects and programmes, in the villages,... This means that there are plenty of latent contradictions and conflicts within the sector. This also means that there are interest groups and strategic groups fighting fierce wars for power, positions and penny. We see those who want to promote redistribution (globally and nationally) and those who favour growth (globally and nationally); those who urge for more attention for humanitarian catastrophes and those who call for preventive and structural solutions; those who see the State as the most legitimate player

---

<sup>2</sup> In the Netherlands, part of this phenomenon has been called “particuliere initiatieven” (private initiatives); in France it is called “coopération décentralisée”; sociologically the fourth pillar can be seen as a consequence of mainstreaming (“vermaatschappelijking”) of development cooperation.

<sup>3</sup> Many look for a win-win, an idea refuted by the traditional players who only want the South to win

## PAPER

### Public support for international development cooperation

and those who prefer the dynamism and innovative capacity of the private sector; those who want everything to go to the bottom poor and those who see more benefit in investing in change agents who rarely belong to the poorer segments of society; those who defend technical assistance and those who are believers of the budget support approach; those who favour short-term projects and those who advocate long-term commitments and programmes; those who plead for ownership of recipient countries and communities and those who believe that some donorship and conditionalities are indispensable.

The implication of all this grumbling and muddling is that the traditional development cooperation community has never been able to define what good development cooperation is. Public opinion is deluged with contradictory messages coming from all these different strategic groups. In the absence of a coherent discourse the public makes its own cocktail. For the public good development cooperation is believed to be “quick wins realised by capable westerners who help with water, health and education, effectively controlling whatever is done with ‘our money’ particularly by corrupt governments and avoiding all unnecessary overhead costs”. It goes without saying that development cooperation specialists are frustrated with this naïve, old-fashioned public opinion which is so much “in contradiction with what we are doing and should do”.

Even the Paris Declaration is not very helpful in our search for a definition of good development cooperation because it is primarily inspired by bad practice and only tries to weed them out. And, still, continuous public support depends on a clear understanding of what good development cooperation is.

In the mean time, the new actors coming on the field (fourth pillar, but also new ‘donors’ such as China and India) can not be bothered. They do not believe in development cooperation master plans or logical frameworks. The plan is replaced by the man. The man has the freedom and the plight to take action, to take risks, to be entrepreneurial. See the contrast with the traditional development cooperation sector who considered non-specialists (the public at large) as having only obligations to give, to remain at home and to leave the real job to the specialists. The confrontation between the development specialists and the new actors might bring fire into the arena!

### 3. The traditional development cooperation market: challenge 3

The development cooperation sector is not only a community and an arena. It is also a market. It is not only inspired by value rationality (the main rationality of a community) or power rationality (the main rationality of an arena). It is also profoundly affected by a calculative rationality (the main rationality of a market). The players on the market deal with each other as sellers and clients, competitors and money-seekers.

But it is of course a special market. The players see themselves as not-for-profit institutions but have a very strong focus on everything money. Financial management is a multi-actor process involving governmental agencies, non-governmental organisations, recipient governments and beneficiary organisations. Each has its own financial interests and operating modes. Ownership (in legal terms<sup>4</sup>) of means acquired with development aid money is very nebulous. Who owns the bridge or road, the health clinic and its medical equipment, the school and the computer in Kaya, Burkina Faso?

---

<sup>4</sup> The “ownership” discussion of the moment only focuses on the governance issue (“who is in control?”), but ownership also has a legal dimension (“who is the proprietor?”) and a profit/loss dimension (“who can get the benefits/profits if there are any and who pays the bill if things go wrong?”)

## PAPER

### Public support for international development cooperation

The development cooperation market is fuelled by financial resources stemming from governmental and private sources. The traditional development cooperation specialists do know that there is no causal relation between 0,7% of rich countries' GDP and the resolution of the poverty problems in the third world. Still this norm has become a mantra for the sector. It could be looked at in a different way also. The fact that few countries reach that level of development commitment and that even 1% is only a meagre share of national wealth and government budgets does confirm that political and public support for the sector is weak. Development agencies also look at private sources to finance their operations. For this the most advanced techniques of merchandising and marketing are utilised, often at the expense of the sectors' conviction that developing countries should be considered and pictured as owners of their destiny and hopes and not as victims of fate. But the market of philanthropy and generosity is not endlessly elastic and competition is fierce. The market is very demanding also and volumes of private gifts have not quadrupled since the 1960s where private wealth of westerners has.

Here again we see that the traditional development cooperation sector is being challenged. New actors tap into the same market. While they might have much less general credibility when it comes to development cooperation, they have very strong local credibility. Local media adore their proximity, their visibility, their action-orientation, their simple language. Friends and colleagues strongly believe that their fourth pillar initiative produces the best results because of low or no overhead and because they know the person(s) behind the initiative.

But again, innovation might come from these challengers. They are experimenting with new financial products replacing or complementing the recurrent small gift. Some allow you to become a member (and thus to pay member-dues), to buy (cooperative) shares, to make a loan, to lease ground, to give bank guarantees or other financial derivatives. Few traditional development cooperation actors allow their supporters to choose between different formula of financial participation and stick to the easy (but boring and anonymous) financial donations.

#### 4. Challenges become opportunities

The traditional development sector is thus facing serious challenges as a community, an arena and a market. But these challenges can become opportunities and can inspire an agenda for change and transformation. In this way the shallowness and lightness of public support for development cooperation could be remedied and make place for a more embedded and rooted form of development cooperation.

##### Elements for such an agenda could be:

- take the fermentations in society serious: the culture of participation in the age of globalisation is different than the one of the age of cold war;
- make yourself understandable: get rid of the verbalism of the sector and be concrete;
- define what good development cooperation is: and show humility in this;
- interact with new actors: do not deal with them in a paternalistic way;
- interact differently with your supporters: don't treat them as an uneducated audience or mute donors; let them take action;
- link your supporters in a structural way to your organisation: make them members, shareholders, decision-makers;

## **PAPER**

### **Public support for international development cooperation**

- make your supporters the partners of your African, Asian or Latin-American partners: professionals can be useful as co-pilots or in the back-seat;
- and last but not least: repeat again and again that “it is about the money, but not all about the money”.

#### References:

Develtere P. (ed), Het draagvlak voor duurzame ontwikkeling: wat het is en zou kunnen zijn, De Boeck, Antwerpen, 2003

Develtere P., De Belgische Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, Davidsfonds, Leuven, 2005

Develtere P. & T. De Bruyn, The emergence of a fourth pillar in development cooperation, HIVA, Leuven

## Opbouwen of afbreken: Het draagvlak voor ontwikkelingssamenwerking in Nederland in de komende tien jaar

### 1. Inleiding

Is er over tien jaar nog draagvlak voor ontwikkelingssamenwerking in Nederland? Het blijft gissen en een beetje koffiedik kijken, maar een paar toekomstbeelden komen bij mij naar boven als ik over dit thema nadenk:

*Een sector met een zeer negatief imago, door de onophoudelijke 'bashing' campagnes van populaire partijen...  
...of juist ontwikkelingssamenwerking dat weer terug is op de politieke agenda, omdat de voedselcrisis immense proporties heeft aangenomen; Afrikaanse organisaties die in Nederland fondsenwervings-filialen openen om zelf direct geld in te zamelen;  
Jongeren die via internet intensief contact hebben met leeftijdsgenoten aan de andere kant van de wereld;  
NGO's die alle draagvlak zijn verloren omdat zij alleen nog maar in de marge actief zijn, omdat anderen –bedrijven, commerciële bureaus- armoedebestrijding veel beter bleken te kunnen vormgeven....  
...of juist NGO's met een nieuw, fris imago van organisaties die opkomen voor de armen, maar daarbij innovatief te werk gaan, en daarmee nieuw draagvlak winnen.*

Zo kan ik nog wel even doorgaan, en de lezer waarschijnlijk ook. Waar het naar toe zal gaan de komende jaren heeft de sector uiteraard niet volledig zelf in de hand. Daarvoor is ontwikkelingssamenwerking te veel afhankelijk van vele andere spelers en factoren. Maar voor een deel heeft de sector het wél zelf in de hand. Er tekenen zich momenteel een aantal ontwikkelingen af, waar de sector op móet reageren, wil ze niet alle draagvlak verliezen. In dit artikel zal ik hier verder op ingaan, waarbij ik tegelijk reageer op het artikel van Patrick Develtere, "The unbearable lightness of public support for traditional development cooperation".

### 2. De analyse van Develtere

Develtere schetst op een heldere wijze een paar belangrijke ontwikkelingen die het draagvlak van ontwikkelingssamenwerking in het Noorden raken:

- De opkomst van nieuwe spelers, die zich met ontwikkelingssamenwerking bezighouden, maar niet per definitie tot de traditionele OS-sector behoren. Deze 'fourth pillar' in OS (waarbij Develtere overigens wel heel veel op één hoop veegt) opereren meestal onafhankelijk van de traditionele organisaties. Ze hoeven zich geen zorgen te maken over brede publieke steun, omdat ze die niet direct nodig hebben, en op creatieve manier in eigen kring steun organiseren.
- De toegenomen kritische houding bij het publiek ten aanzien van OS, ondanks de publieke steun die nog altijd onverminderd groot is (werkt het? Is de armoede nu nog niet de wereld uit?)
- Het debat over OS, dat een kakofonie is van uiteenlopende meningen over wat goede ontwikkelingssamenwerking is. Met de nieuwe spelers in het veld, en verschuivende machtsverhoudingen (opkomst van China en India als donoren) komt er in ieder geval weer leven in de brouwerij!

## Comment

### Public support for international development cooperation

Ik mis ook een aantal zaken in het verhaal van Devetere, die mijns inziens wel belangrijk zijn voor het verder nadenken over de toekomst van draagvlak voor OS. Hieronder geef ik aan welke elementen ik mis, of plaats ik net een ander accent bij zaken die hij noemt.

#### 3. Aanvullende elementen

##### a. Draagvlak is niet los verkrijgbaar

Een belangrijk element dat ik in het verhaal van Delvetere mis, is dat draagvlak in het Noorden geen op zichzelf staand iets is. Hoewel hij het niet expliciet benoemt, lijkt zijn verhaal toch vooral over draagvlak in het Noorden te gaan. Het verder versterken van draagvlak voor OS in het Noorden zal echter nooit kunnen zonder draagvlak voor OS in het Zuiden. Het belang van het verbinden van deze twee zal in de komende jaren alleen maar sterker worden.

Al in de vorige beleidsronde van DGIS is duidelijk erkend dat de sector van internationale samenwerking een keten vormt, waarin verschillende actoren een eigen rol spelen in de keten. Geen van deze actoren heeft een autonome positie in de keten (ook al denken ze dat soms zelf wel). Of het nu gaat om dorpscomités in een Zambiaans dorp, de Zuidelijke NGO in de hoofdstad, de Nederlandse ondernemers die uitwisselen met Afrikaanse ondernemers, de fondsenwervende instelling in Nederland, het actiecomité in Zwolle of DGIS die subsidie verleent aan MFS-organisaties, ze zijn allemaal afhankelijk van andere schakels in de keten. In deze keten wordt draagvlak gevormd (of afgebroken) en dient draagvlak in de komende jaren verder versterkt te worden.

Dit betekent dat draagvlak in het Zuiden een directe relatie heeft met draagvlak in het Noorden (Nederland). Als NGO's in het Zuiden slecht presteren, of geen draagvlak hebben onder de lokale bevolking, heeft dat op termijn gevolgen voor het draagvlak in Nederland. Maar ook Nederlandse NGO's die geen draagvlak hebben bij Zuidelijke NGO's zullen vroeg of laat door de mand vallen, met name als de behoefte aan financiering vanuit het Zuiden wegvalt.

##### b. Het Zuiden zit niet meer per definitie op ons draagvlak te wachten

Het maatschappelijk middenveld in het Zuiden is de afgelopen jaren sterker en onafhankelijker geworden. Het kader is sterker geworden, de lokale financieringsmogelijkheden zijn toegenomen en nieuwe donoren zoals China en India dienen zich aan. Noordelijke organisaties, die vasthouden aan een koloniale donorhouding (uitsluitend sterke nadruk op verantwoording van Zuiden naar Noorden ipv wederzijds afleggen van verantwoording, eenzijdige invulling van partnership) zullen op korte termijn het Zuiden 'uitgezet' worden. Of ze worden in Nederland weg geconcurrereerd door branches van NGO's in het Zuiden die in Europa fondsenwervingkantoren opgezet hebben. Samenwerken op basis van gedeelde waarden, het (ver)delen van verantwoordelijkheden binnen de keten op een gelijkwaardige wijze zullen keiharde voorwaarden vormen om op een vruchtbare manier samen te werken met Zuidelijke organisaties.

Voor organisaties in het Zuiden betekent het dat ze zich meer en beter moeten realiseren dat ook zij direct bijdragen aan draagvlak. De vraag naar verantwoording richting hun eigen achterban (de armen die zij met hun werk bereiken) zal de komende jaren snel toenemen.

## Comment

### Public support for international development cooperation

#### c. Toenemende druk om concrete resultaten te tonen...

Er is een toenemende druk vanuit het Nederlandse publiek om aantoonbare resultaten te laten zien, een ontwikkeling die ook door Develtere wordt genoemd. De kritische (achterdochtige) houding wordt versterkt door populaire politici als Verdonk en Wilders. Dit legt een behoorlijke druk op ontwikkelingssamenwerking. Het zal steeds belangrijker worden dat het nut en de toegevoegde waarde van ontwikkelingssamenwerking (en daarbinnen: van de verschillende kanalen) op een eenvoudige en overtuigende wijze wordt uitgelegd. Ontwikkelingssamenwerking moet laten zien dat 'het werkt', maar mag ook laten zien dat het in ons eigen belang is. Hoe cynisch het ook klinkt, OS kan helpen armoede op afstand te houden doordat goede OS emigratie naar het Westen kan ontmoedigen.

Dit vraagt wel actiever weerwerk op de negatieve verhalen, vanuit de sector, maar bij voorkeur van daarbuiten. Politieke partijen kunnen hier een belangrijke rol in spelen door serieus weerwerk te bieden aan Trots op Nederland en de PVV. Ze moeten die 'impressive track record' waar Develtere op p. 1 over spreekt in anderhalve minuut kunnen samenvatten en die voortdurend kunnen vertalen naar de burgers. Daarbij mogen ook argumenten van eigen belang een rol spelen, en moeten we ook het lef hebben de mislukkingen te laten zien. OS is nu eenmaal risicovol ondernemen.

#### d. ... maar het draagvlak blijft groot, en daar moeten we in investeren

Het is een bekende valkuil om alle energie te verspillen aan de klagende minderheid. Uiteraard moet terechte kritiek op OS op een goede wijze beantwoord worden. Maar de sector heeft nog altijd breed draagvlak onder de bevolking, en daar moeten we zuinig op zijn. Het draagvlak voor de toekomst bevindt zich voornamelijk in die groep. Het wordt een grote uitdaging om de betrokken Nederlanders uit te leggen hoe de rol van OS gaat veranderen. Dat de rol van OS de komende jaren relatief kleiner gaat worden als het gaat om armoedebestrijding. Maar dat steun nog altijd nodig blijft, zodat OS een blijvende rol kan blijven spelen, als intermediair – door het verbinden van mensen, organisaties, initiatieven over de hele wereld; als vernieuwer, als katalysator van ontwikkelingen die ten goede komen aan de armen, en als advocaat, door onrecht aan de kaak te stellen.

#### e. Particulier Initiatief: speelkwartier is voorbij

Naast het groeiend aantal 'achterdochtigen' is er ook een grote groep voor wie met name begrippen als 'authenticiteit', 'zelf doen' en 'niet bureaucratisch' erg belangrijk zijn. Dit is de groep die valt onder wat tegenwoordig het 'particulier initiatief' heeft, en graag zelf projecten in het Zuiden uitvoert.

Tegelijkertijd lijkt voor deze groep het speelkwartier ook af te lopen: na de 'professionele' OS-organisaties zijn zij nu aan de beurt om kritisch onder de loupe genomen te worden (zie het onderzoek van Lau Schulpen). Verder is er een groeiende groep particuliere initiatieven die bij de grotere clubs aanklopt voor advies en support, omdat men na enige jaren ervaring ontdekt dat het zelf runnen, aansturen of volgen van een project complexer is dan men dacht. Het lijkt erop dat het particuliere initiatief zich begint te stabiliseren, en dat er een begin is van samenwerking met de 'gevestigde orde'. Voor het draagvlak in Nederland zal het PI een belangrijke rol blijven spelen, maar hun rol zal niet groter worden. Zij kunnen zich niet losmaken uit de keten, en zullen daarom binnen niet al te lange tijd met dezelfde uitdagingen in het Noorden (zie A en C en Zuiden (zie bv punt B) geconfronteerd worden

## Comment

### Public support for international development cooperation

#### f. OS gaat concurreren met Nederlandse projecten

De sociale zekerheid zal de komende decennia steeds sterker onder druk komen te staan. Er is al een trend zichtbaar dat verantwoordelijkheid voor sociale voorzieningen door de overheid bij het maatschappelijk middenveld, of zelfs individuen neer wordt gelegd. Het gevolg zal niet zijn dat de bereidwilligheid van Nederlanders af zal nemen om solidair te zijn met anderen. Het gevolg zal wél zijn, dat OS in het Zuiden meer concurrentie krijgt. Ook het particulier initiatief zal te maken krijgen met dezelfde concurrentie. Het is niet onwaarschijnlijk dat de Rotary Club die nu actief is voor onderwijs in Kenia, over vijftien jaar zich inzet voor thuiszorg in de eigen woonplaats.

#### g. Deuren open naar nieuwe actoren voor draagvlak onontbeerlijk

De relatieve betekenis van OS gaat afnemen. Hiermee wordt de rol van andere sectoren, zoals het bedrijfsleven belangrijker. Organisaties die nog steeds terughoudend zijn in het verbindings leggen met actoren buiten het 'traditionele' OS, zullen het steeds moeilijker krijgen. Als OS-organisaties relevant willen blijven, en het belang van de armen centraal willen blijven stellen op de plekken waar het er echt toe doet, dan moeten de deuren open. Slimme verbindings met collega-instellingen, bedrijven, de achterban, de overheid, de wetenschap etc kunnen zorgen voor een breed draagvlak in de samenleving. Een absolute voorwaarde voor deze vorm van samenwerking is een kwetsbare opstelling richting anderen.

Dit laatste wordt nog een behoorlijke krachtsinspanning voor een sector waar bijvoorbeeld het delen van evaluaties nog altijd maar mondjesmaat gebeurt, en de professionals erg overtuigd zijn van hun gelijk. Zonder deze openheid naar en verbindings met anderen, blijft de OS-professional wellicht een deskundige, maar wel één op een eiland. Zonder oog voor de relevantie van zijn of haar werk, en zonder draagvlak in de samenleving.

#### 4. De aanbevelingen

De aanbevelingen die Delveltere doet aan het einde van zijn artikel kan ik allen onderschrijven. Met name zijn oproep voor bescheidenheid wil ik dik onderstrepen. OS moet af van het communiceren van overspannen verwachtingen dat OS de armoede wel even de wereld uithelpt. OS kan zeker een bijdrage leveren aan het verminderen van armoede in de wereld, maar is tegelijkertijd risicovol ondernemen.

Ik wil een paar aanbevelingen toevoegen:

- 'De politiek' blijft een belangrijke rol spelen in het instandhouden van het draagvlak: partijen moeten serieus weerwerk bieden aan Trots op Nederland en de PVV; ze moeten die 'impressive track record' waar Develtere op p. 1 over spreekt in anderhalve minuut kunnen samenvatten en die voortdurend kunnen vertalen naar de burgers. Daarbij mogen ook argumenten van eigen belang een rol spelen.
- De overheid en NGO's zouden positief kunnen inspelen op particuliere initiatieven door een soort EHBO-centrum (geïnspireerd op Mirjam Vossens boek) daarvoor in te richten: een vraagbaak of consultancy faciliteit. Daarbij moeten ze een balans zoeken tussen 'zomaar laten gaan' en 'alles willen overnemen'.
- De rol van OS verandert, maar dit betekent niet dat de armoede de wereld uit is. OS-organisaties moeten blijven zoeken naar manieren om, met steun van anderen, te vechten tegen armoede in de wereld. Dit vraagt creatieve manieren om de Nederlandse achterban te betrekken bij de nieuwe vormen van OS. Het onderscheiden van

## Comment

### Public support for international development cooperation

verschillende groepen (met ieder eigen behoeften t.a.v. betrokkenheid) binnen de eigen achterban kan daarbij veel helpen. De ene groep wil simpelweg geld doneren, de ander kennis inbrengen of actief participeren. Uitwisseling van jongeren kan veel bijdragen aan draagvlakversterking. Maar ook andere verbindingen (met bedrijfsleven etc) worden steeds belangrijker, vanuit relevantie, en om breed draagvlak voor OS te creëren. OS-clubs moeten hier klaar voor zijn.

- OS-organisaties moeten concreet aan kunnen tonen dat zij draagvlak hebben bij hun partners in het Zuiden, en (direct of indirect) bij de bevolking in het Zuiden. Zonder dit draagvlak is hun werk zinloos. Een toetsing van dit criterium kan bijvoorbeeld zijn in hoeverre beleid gevormd wordt samen met partners in het Zuiden, en in welke mate er wordt samengewerkt op diverse terreinen. Een gelijkwaardige samenwerking biedt de mogelijkheid om taken te verdelen, ook op het terrein van fondsenwerving en draagvlakversterking.

By: Henny  
Helmich\*,

Dutch National  
Committee for  
International Co-  
operation and  
Sustainable  
Development  
(NCDO),

## Public Support for International Co-operation in the Netherlands, including the latest public opinion results on support for international development 2008

*Whether support levels for aid are low or high, what the numbers suggest is that people know very little about it. In most countries when aid budgets are reduced, there is little public protest, suggesting as well that support is a mile wide and an inch deep.*  
-Ian Smillie, 1998

### 1. Opportunities, Values and the Omnipotence Trap

At the eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *James Michel*, the Chairman of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), told a Tokyo audience, referring to the first conceptualisation of what would later become the Millennium Development Goals: 'We have an unprecedented opportunity to build our knowledge and beliefs, to overcome the contradictions in our policies and practices, and to work together on a shared vision of an improved quality of life for all'.<sup>1</sup>

Attitudes toward development assistance are reflected within wider public attitudes about the society people want to live in. Canadians, for example, believe in 'self-reliance and compassion, leading to collective responsibility; investment, especially in children as the future generation and democracy'. They also believe in 'a search for real change; higher ethical standards; individual participation; a moral community'.<sup>2</sup> *Eric Young*, a Canadian media analyst, observes that 'people are not talking about international development here, but within the values they espouse, there are the seeds for renewed support for development for engaging people's interest in the kind of world they want to live in'.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding values and public opinion about development co-operation of Americans, *Daniel Yankelovich*, the nestor of the US public opinion research, believes that the gap between peoples' values and their perception of international development aid is caused, by a 'cognitive dissonance' which emanates from the public's overwhelming 'preoccupation with troubling domestic problems', 'a conviction that the money is being wasted', a latent 'suspicion of leaders' priorities' and a host of negative Third World images.<sup>4</sup> In short, no matter what the good news is, the public comes to the question of foreign aid with a 'lifetime of prejudice' fuelled by the perception that aid has little impact, is used for self-serving purposes, and is being wasted by bureaucrats and dictators alike. Together, these negative influences and stereotypes reinforce public resistance, or unwillingness to accept that the facts about aid could be otherwise.

---

\* Henny Helmich writes this paper in his personal capacity

<sup>1</sup> Michel, James, in Helmich, Henny, *International Development Co-operation in Transition: The Challenge to Increase Public Support*, Paris, OECD, 1997

<sup>2</sup> *Exploring Canadian Values*. Suzanne Peters, CPRN. 1995; cited in *Strategies for Public Engagement*. Eric Young, 1996, p.4

<sup>3</sup> Young, Eric, *Strategies for Public Engagement*, 1996, p.4

<sup>4</sup> Yankelovich, Daniel, 'Public Judgement on Development Aid' in: Colm Foy and Henny Helmich, *Public Support for International Development*, OECD, Paris, 1996, p.61

## Comment

### Public support for international development cooperation

Part of the problem is a result of the way aid agencies have justified in the past forty years their efforts to the public, falling into what *Christian Wilmsen*, a former senior official of the German Ministry for Development Co-operation, calls the '*Omnipotence Trap*'. In suggesting to the public that aid will solve the poverty problem, 'other important factors in the reduction of poverty in developing countries - such as cutting out protectionism - are driven out of public debate. At the same time this subconsciously supports monocausal thinking, for example in the idea that development co-operation could solve the poverty problem on its own. Quite understandably, many people now say that development co-operation must have failed in view of the fact that need is still growing in developing countries.<sup>5</sup>

Since these observations were made a decade has gone by. Europe has moved from the Cold War of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the peace dividend after 1989, already in the 1990s broken by the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia, to the *neocon* War on Terror of the 2000s. Soviet communism as an arch enemy of the free world has been replaced in the international and domestic public debate by fundamentalist Islam. Political scientist *Samuel Huntington*<sup>6</sup> has proven right as far as mass public opinion is concerned.

## 2. A Self-indulgent Wealthy Dutch Society

Dutch society has changed in mirror to the challenge of its age. The perception of development co-operation is received and re-created by an increasingly self indulgent Dutch domestic audience that lives in one of the wealthiest societies of the world. Their quality of life and life expectancy is unsurpassed in history. At the same time, many Dutch fear the cold winds of globalisation affecting their future economic well-being blanking-out their actual and potential gains from increased international trade. Poverty and marginalisation combined burdens a sizeable part of a large and recent immigrant community representing some 6 percent of Dutch population. Ethnic identity has become an issue. Cynicism is rife that government – any government - actually will deliver on promises with real measurable results.

Up to 85 percent of the Dutch receives their information about poverty and development from television as their first source. For a large part of them this remains often their only source. The best watched television programme about developing countries is *Groeten uit de Rimboe*, a horrible infotainment format that makes fun of 'primitive tribesmen' in their first confrontation with a flush toilet in a Dutch home, and Dutch adolescents in their first efforts to eat 'something awful' in the bush of Afrika. None of this comes close to any experience of real developing countries' societies and the conditions of our fellow men surviving extreme poverty, war, conflict and misogynist oppression.

## 3. Development Aid in Unprecedented Crisis?

The Pearson Report<sup>7</sup> of the 1960s seriously warned that development co-operation had come to a defining turning point. Public and political support was in danger of a fatal collapse!

The alarm about a sudden crisis facing the effort and the fearful projection of this alarm by concerned hard working development professionals is a

<sup>5</sup> Wilmsen, Christian, 'The Omnipotence Trap; The Erosion of Development Policy in the German Public Eye', Ecumenical Dialogue; Views from Germany, 2/96, Supplement to EKD Bulletin, 1996

<sup>6</sup> Huntington, Samuel, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', Foreign Affairs, 1993, initially a reaction to [Francis Fukuyama's The End of History and the Last Man](#) of 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Pearson, Lester B., Partners in Development: Report of the Commission on International Development, London, 1969.

## Comment

### Public support for international development cooperation

recurrent and regular phenomenon. It is part of the burden of the development education profession. The reasons are well known and the undercurrents producing these alarms are real. Research and analysis is the only way to distinguished between perceived 'aid fatigue,' compassion fatigue or a unexpected collapse in values of charity and solidarity and projections of a fundamental doubt and an 'omnipotence trap' on our co-citizens.

#### 4. Traditional Development Co-operation?

The general effort of DAC Members has been focused on poverty alleviation only since the middle of the 1990s and still coherence of all official donor policies to align with the Millennium Development Goals is an issue. Civil society efforts have become much stronger in the 1990s. The early organisations of civil society since the start of the missionary movements have been engaged in development co-operation for different reasons. They were responding to religious duties, to human suffering and disasters, oppression of women and the wreckages of slavery and war.<sup>8</sup> This has *branded* development aid as a visible humanitarian effort, an emergency response and much of its image has remained like this in the public mind, sustained by effective campaigning and fundraising techniques of NGOs. The public lacks a general framework to understand what is going on. It is being asked to contribute to solving the problems and is irritated that nobody seems to be able to 'solve' problems with fast and high quality 'solutions'.

From more recent origin is a trend in which citizens increasingly take their own initiatives. 'Small' private projects - not always small – are initiated increasingly by former professions from the field of development co-operation that are longing to do something concrete, by veterans from military peace operations, by young people looking for self-realisation and deep engagement with the future of our planet and its people. These initiatives have become very visible in the public eye and seem to respond to the urgent need to see results. 'All small progress counts'. Fact is that the communication effort of the citizens themselves reaches the public and in particular those parts of the public that have no longer positive feelings about institutions and government. Official development efforts and NGO institutions should take this 'channel of participative communication' with the public much more seriously, as they engage more than 500.000 people in an authentic and direct development effort.

#### 5. Co-financing and Complementarities: what is was and what it is.

Expenditure of ODA though NGOs feels for some politicians as a 'cost'. Dutch development policies have been qualified regularly by independent expert institutions as being of high quality and effectiveness. These results would never have been obtained without a tremendous effort by many Dutch NGO's that have been co-financed in their work by the ODA budget of the government. In this way the government has been able to contract as stakeholders the efforts of professionals in the non-profit area multiplied a thousandfold by the engagement and participation of thousands of citizens that support these NGOs. There is no chance that the government would be able to reach its objectives without the participation of these large stakeholders.

---

<sup>8</sup> Helmich, Henny, New Partnerships in Development Co-operation, Introduction to the Directory of NGOs in OECD Member Countries, OECD Paris, 1990 p 13-39.

## Comment

### Public support for international development cooperation

In itself this co-financing effort is responsible for a large part of public support for politics and politicians in development co-operation. It is important therefore to shift the perception of cost to the value of *subsidiarity* by which mechanism the focus is where it should be on the very high return of investment in this field. The field may be pluriform and pluralistic, and should perhaps be better looking for constant ways of organisational impact improvement including better complementarities.

Co-financing means that the North matches public financial and expert capital, with human expert capital of the South. Human capital of the South, including from partner organisations of Northern NGOs, is not valued by economists at the same level as the donor agency monetary input, but makes in reality happen most of the change in development. In the present domestic debate co-financing has lost this dimension including the accountability about this aspect to the donor countries' public and has almost never reached any level of meaningful accountability to the public in developing countries. This needs to be changed.

#### **6. 2008 Public Support Facts: Lower Support for Increases for Aid correlating with Impressions of Lower Aid Effectiveness.**

Currently public survey methodologies by NCDO have been adapted in recent years, and statistical results can be compared with some caution as to yet unknown effects of methodological change. Approximation of reality is however still at a valid statistical level. In a few weeks after writing this paper NCDO will publish the final results of the 2008 Barometer Internationale Samenwerking (BIS - *Barometer International Co-operation*). At this moment the first results can already be compared with the situation ten years ago to make informed statements about trends in public support.<sup>9</sup>

The Netherlands continues with a relatively strong tradition of public support for development co-operation as compared to other donor countries. Opinion polls since 1970 to the end of the 1990s have shown that an average of 80 percent of the public thought that aid should be maintained or increased. In particular in the 1990s the public was only for a small part in favour of cutting aid budgets. During 2000-2008, the first 8 years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the average level of this support dropped with 20 percent, with a strong majority of 64 percent however still in favour of maintaining or increasing government spending levels.<sup>10</sup>

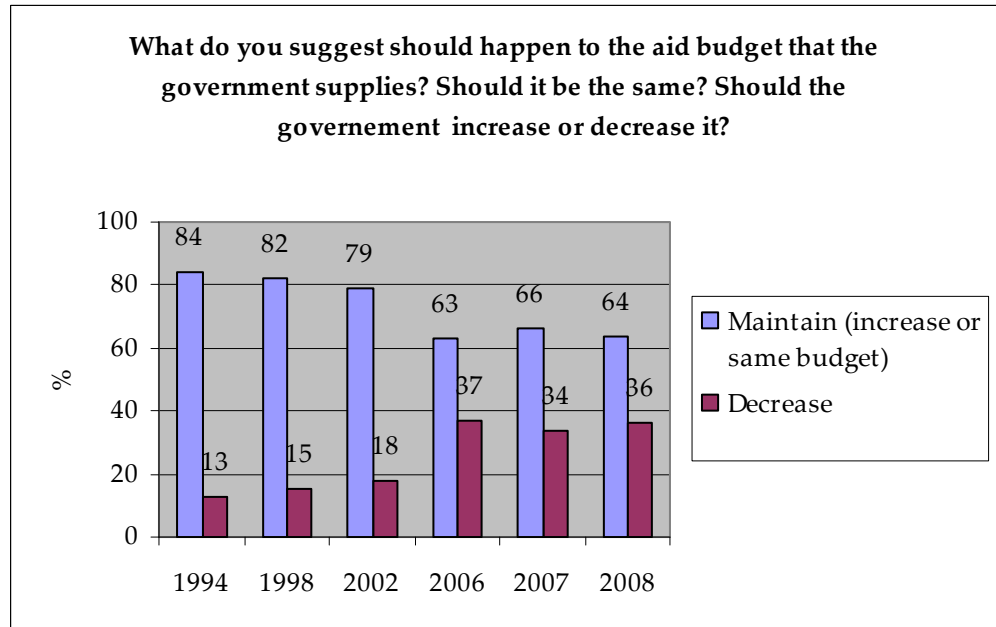
---

<sup>9</sup> NCDO/Motivaction, Barometer Internationale Samenwerking, to be published July 2008.

<sup>10</sup> These new figures were produced after a change of methodology from telephone interviews to webbased surveys, as in recent years telephone surveys became unreliable because of high non-responses levels. Figures from 1990s based on telephone surveys before this methodological switch are however considered reliable enough to make comparisons with present data produced with new methodologies.

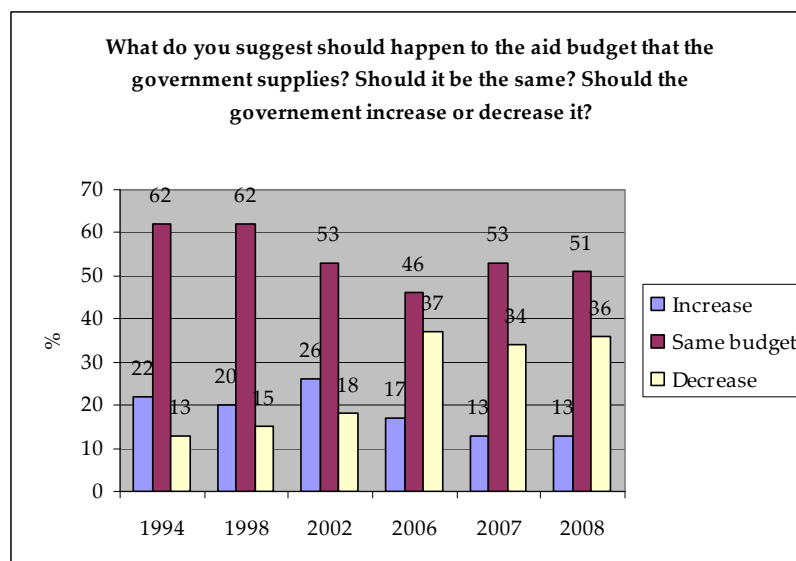
## Comment

### Public support for international development cooperation



In 1998<sup>11</sup>, some 20 percent thought that aid levels should be increased, 62 percent was in favour of a stable budget, and 15 percent wished to cut the levels. What is the picture in 2008? The latest figures show a significant drop in the group that wishes aid budgets to be increased: 13 percent. Some 51 percent is in favour of a stable budget. 36 percent of people is in favour of cutting present levels, more than double the figure of the 1990s.

What do you suggest should happen to the aid budget that the government supplies? Should it be the same? Should the government increase or decrease it?	1994	1998	2002	2006	2007	2008
Increase	22	20	26	17	13	13
Same budget	62	62	53	46	53	51
Decrease	13	15	18	37	34	36



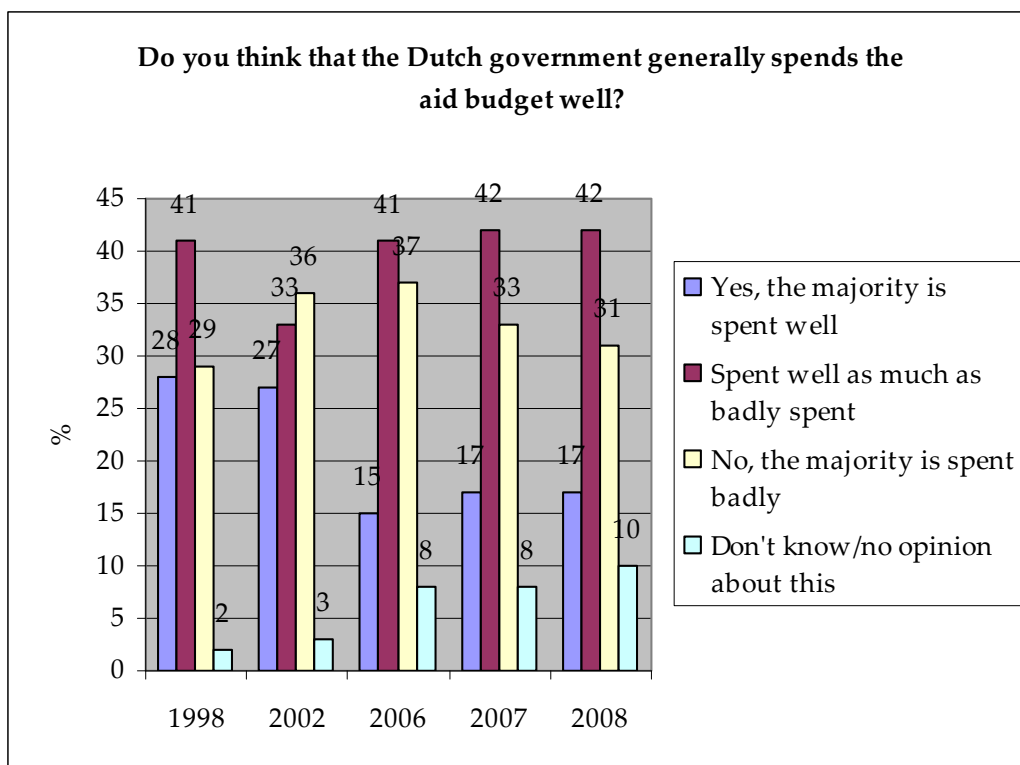
<sup>11</sup> A joint survey by NCDO and the magazine *Onze Wereld*, 1998

**Comment**

**Public support for international development cooperation**

How does this trend correlate with the perception of aid effectiveness of the Dutch public? While the majority of Dutch public remains committed to aid, it is important to note that public scepticism about the impact of aid had already risen significantly ten years ago. In 1998 some 28 percent thought that aid was well spent. Some 29 percent of the survey population thought that the major part of aid was badly spent. The balance middle group was approximately 41 percent with only 2 percent in the 'no opinion' category. Public scepticism about the impact of aid rose further to present 2008 levels of 17 percent of the population thinking that aid is well spent. The part of the population thinking that aid is badly spent rose slightly to 31 percent. The middle ground was maintained with a stable percentage of 42 percent of people who think that good and bad spending is in balance but a group of 10 percent indicating no opinion or insufficient knowledge, significantly up from the 2 percent of 1998.

<b>Do you think that the Dutch government generally spends the aid budget well?</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>
Yes, the majority is spent well	28	27	15	17	17
Spent well as much as badly spent	41	33	41	42	42
No, the majority is spent badly	29	36	37	33	31
Don't know/no opinion about this	2	3	8	8	10

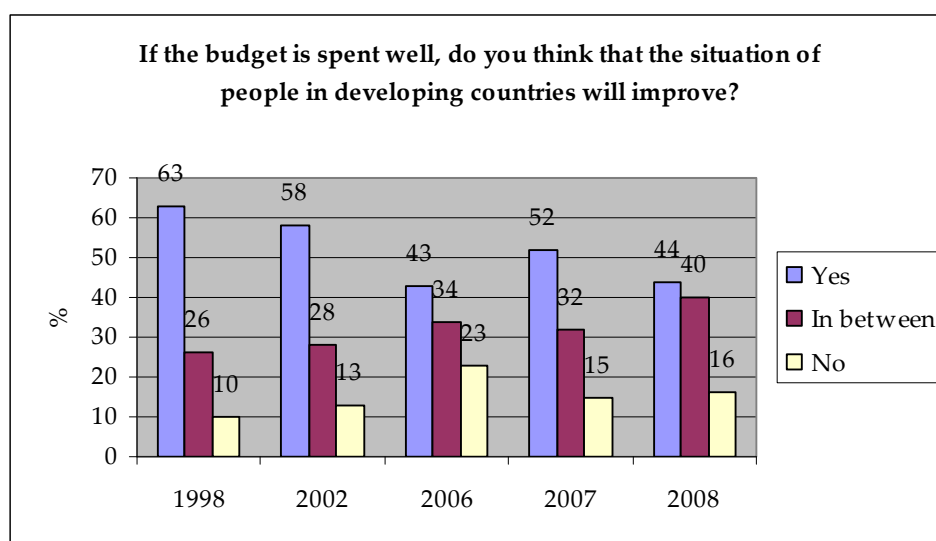


## Comment

### Public support for international development cooperation

The major shift in thinking about effectiveness of aid is in the decline of the positive thinking about aid and shift to the 'do not know/no opinion' category. The negative thinkers about aid have not gained much ground in the past ten years, but are at an uncomfortable high level of almost one third of Dutch society.

However the public still maintains a positive outlook on the potential of development aid if they would be convinced that aid would be well spent. In the survey years 2006 to 2008 the question was asked: 'If aid would be spent well, do you think that the situation of people in developing countries would improve?' The reply to this question was in 2006 'yes' 43 percent, 'average' 34 percent and 'no' 23 percent. In 2008 these percentages are 'yes' 44 percent, average '40' percent and no '16' percent.

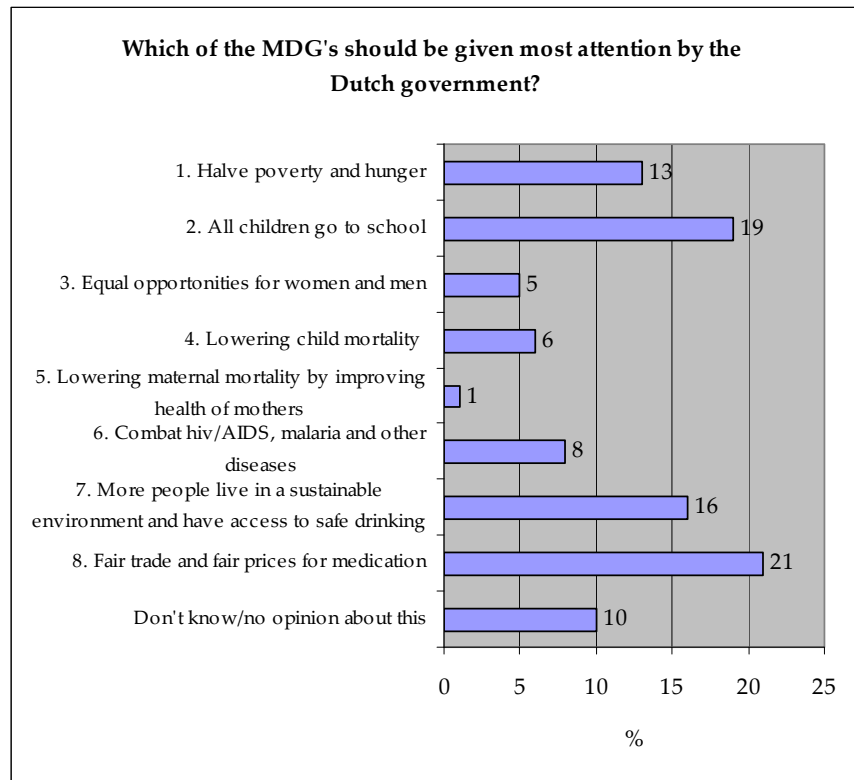


## 7. Opinions about Progress in Millennium Development Goals and other Policy Priorities

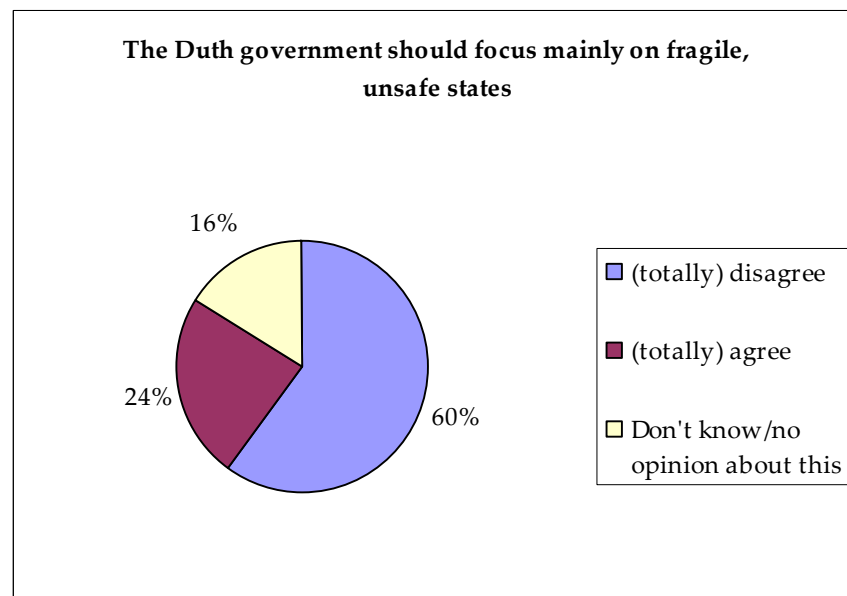
Communication about the results of the work on the Millennium Development Goals has resulted in 2008 in a mixed picture: To the question 'For which of the MDGs the Dutch government should give most attention?' the Dutch public gives in 2008 the highest scores to MDG8: fair trade and fair prices for medication (21 percent), MDG2, all children should go to school (19 percent) and MDG7 clean environment and access to safe drinking water (16 percent). The absolute lowest priorities are given to MDG5 lowering maternal mortality (1 percent) and MDG3 equal opportunities for men and women (5 percent) followed by MDG4 lowering child mortality (6 percent) and MDG6 the fight against diseases such as HIV/Aids (8 percent). It seems that government policy priorities to intensify the effort in the areas of MDGs for which too little progress is made have not yet been communicated effectively to the public and the lack of progress, indeed the regressions, in these MDG targets perceived by the government is not translated into public awareness. Figures from other European countries point in the same direction.

## Comment

### Public support for international development cooperation

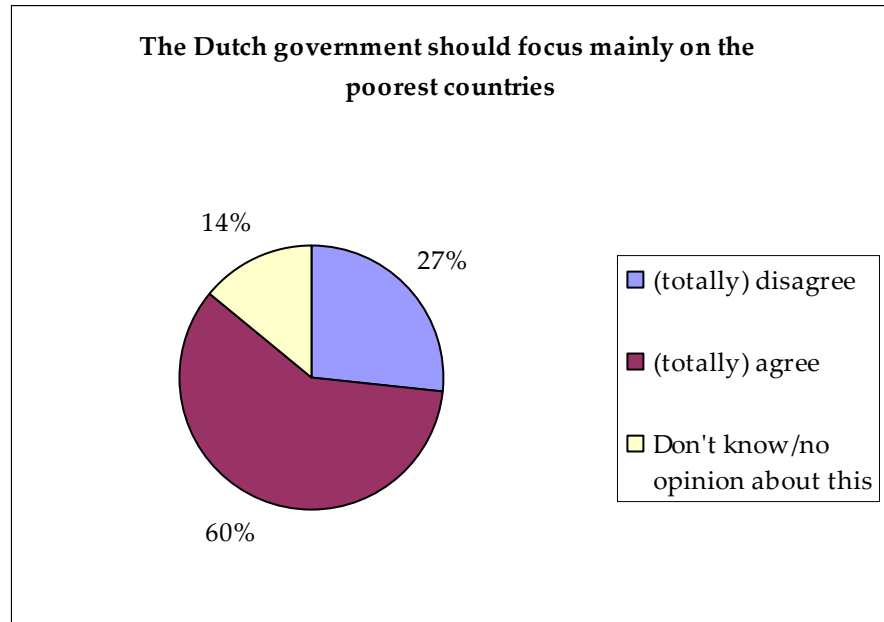


Another major government priority is the focus of development policies on fragile states. Some 60 percent of Dutch population in 2008 is not in agreement with this focus while only 24 percent supporting and a significant category of 'do not know/no opinion' of 16 percent. Should government focus on the poorest countries of the world receives a mirror response: Yes 60 percent and no 27 percent. Still a significant category of 14 percent has no opinion or not enough information.



## Comment

### Public support for international development cooperation



## 8. Other Dimensions of Public Support

Traditionally public support statistics have focused on the level of support to government budgets and government policies. But is this all that can be said about public support, or should public support in these dimensions be seen as support for government policies and budgets in more general terms? Is the level of public engagement in society with efforts of international poverty eradication in other dimensions also stable? The second most important indicator is the level of voluntary giving. In most OECD/DAC countries, the volume of private donations to humanitarian and development NGO's increased<sup>12</sup> Voluntary giving should be judged against a background of relatively high taxation and a relative high awareness of the size of government budgets for development co-operation. NCDO estimated that public contributions to development NGOs doubled between 1986 and 1997. Looking at the income of the ten largest fundraising organisations in the Netherlands, the share going to development NGOs went from 47 percent to 70 percent between 1988 and 1995 - this indicates a rise in income from Dutch guilders 133 million to Dutch guilders 450 million. Evidence from 2007 figures of the Free University study group *Geven in Nederland* suggests that at present the voluntary giving in this sector is at 439 million up from 304 million in 2005. Obviously these last figures are in Euro values! Between 1986 and 2007 the value of private giving for international co-operation has increased by more than 700 percent! Between 2005 and 2007 the increase has been 44 percent. Surely fundraising campaigns have been successful, but at a real cost of public support in areas of knowledge and understanding of more complex issues. Government monetary co-financing of the MFS organisations is matched with a general public voluntary giving of almost the same size annually.

Other important dimensions of a dynamic public support in Dutch society can be measured and observed. The share of fair trade products purchased is slowly increasing and in particular young people are more in favour of increased government aid budgets. Young people are also more active in private initiatives than average citizens. Interestingly young people are in general much more positive about development co-operation than older

<sup>12</sup> Ida McDonnell, Henri-Bernard Solignac Lecomte and Liam Wegimont, *Publieke opinie en mondiale armoedebestrijding in OESO Landen*, 2003.

## Comment

### Public support for international development cooperation

people with the division at 30 years. In contrast young people seem to worry more than older people about threats to their economic future and are more in favour of protectionist economic policies than their older compatriots. Fair trade is popular among young people but not to so far that free trade is accepted if it damages their own opportunities, it seems. Protagonists of the positive impact of globalisation have still a way to go in this respect.

## 9. Conclusions and Opportunities

Conclusions about 'the' state of 'the' public should be formulated with some nuances. There are significant differences between various mentality groups, each with its own communication and public participation culture. Perceptions of a public support for development co-operation in decline can be mainly found with the declining part of the population that wishes to increase and a significantly growing part of the population that wishes to decrease budgets. However, a majority of Dutch public is still supporting budget stability or increases even at present high levels of expenditure. This is a strong backbone of public support.

Is there cause for alarm this time? There should be concern about the perception of aid effectiveness. It seems that the public lacks information about results of development aid spending. It seems that a crucial challenge in this area needs to be met in the next years in order to maintain support in particular at the middle ground and to try to shift the negative thinkers back to a more neutral stance.

Sobering is the observation that the public is out of gear with the focus of present government priorities. In general the public may not be aware of the lack of progress in some of the more difficult MDGs dealing with equality of men and women despite the fact that priorities for health and reproductive rights have been on the forefront not only of the present government.

Trends in public support in this area should be observed within a wider context of government policies and the lack of public trust in government and institutions. This is in no way only a Dutch phenomenon, but needs to be tackled nevertheless. The lack of public support for objectives of government or political society should however not be projected on a dynamic multi-faceted social engagement with global poverty eradication.

Dutch people still are optimistic about the possibility of development policies making a change in poor societies, provided that aid is better spent. This would seem to indicate that either communication about the way aid is spent should be more effective (in concrete results) or aid should be spent in a different way. In both dimensions an invitation to a critical population to participate more in the formulation of better policies seems to be required. Present fundraising techniques by NGOs do not meet this challenge enough. A complementary common and sustained development education initiative in this area is urgently needed.

Former OECD DAC Chair *James Michel* focused ten years ago on the most important element to make an improved quality of life for all possible: 'What is needed now is the sustained political commitment to pursue that vision with enthusiasm and determination, to expand the radius of support that it enjoys, and to transform it into reality'. *Ian Smillie*<sup>13</sup>, an international development

<sup>13</sup> Smillie, Ian, *Optical and Other Illusions. Trends and Issues in Public Thinking About Development Education*, in: Ian Smillie and Henny Helmich, *Public Attitudes and International Development Co-operation*, Paris, OECD, 1998, p 39

## **Comment**

### **Public support for international development cooperation**

analyst, concluded in 1998: 'If the opportunity that Michel describes is lost, development assistance will likely continue its unprecedented downward slide. For aid critics in the media and for critics on both the left and the right, this would be no bad thing. And where aid has been used for cynical commercial or strategic purposes, it would probably not matter. But among those for whom aid has meant something - those living today because of immunisation programmes, those living better lives because they are healthy and educated, and those that have secured jobs and a better, safer life for their children - for them - this would be a tragedy. And it would inevitably mean greater costs for future generations in the North, obliged to deal with the results tomorrow, of doing less than was possible to eradicate poverty today.' These observations are increasingly relevant ten years later. Giving up now is not a choice that future generations would understand.