

# THE UN MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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**Awareness in the Netherlands and Comparisons  
from other DAC Member Surveys**

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## **Colophon**

*Disclaimer:* The opinions expressed and arguments employed in this article are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the NCDO, the OECD Development Centre or the governments of OECD member countries.

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**In September 2000, at the United Nations' Millennium Summit, world leaders agreed to a set of specific, measurable, time-bound and tough targets for intensifying a focused programme to eliminate poverty, disease, illiteracy and environmental degradation. The improvement of access, particularly of women, to primary education, basic healthcare, and reproductive health services (family planning) figures high on this agenda. These targets are now called the 'Millennium Development Goals' (MDGs).**

A 2003 OECD/Council of Europe report about the state of public opinion regarding international development co-operation stated that an important reason why public opinion and attitudes fail to influence policy making in this area seems to be the continuing shallowness of public awareness and understanding about global development and poverty issues<sup>1</sup>. The authors recalled that experience shows that there is no influence without action, and no effective action without sufficient prior awareness<sup>2</sup>. Several examples quoted in the report showed that when the public is well informed about an issue, it is more likely to act in its favour. The protection of the environment, gender equality, Third World debt cancellation, etc., have all been subjects of active information campaigns before they gathered substantial public support.

There is increased recognition that just as development co-operation is impossible without common agenda building, and partnership and ownership by 'aid recipient' countries, so too is a global education agenda without partnership with the public. This may open encouraging perspectives for the promotion of a *human rights-based approach to development*, as articulated by the United Nations and for the achievement of the MDGs<sup>3</sup>. Better tools and more resources for communication are thus necessary, but they will not bear any real impact unless they are accompanied by greater co-ordination, networking, sharing of best practice, and structural support between practitioners in this area.

The OECD call for a triple approach of information, consultation and active participation of citizens in the policy process, is aimed at sustaining and

improving both the *legitimacy* and the *efficiency* of public policies, which are made increasingly complex by a set of factors, including the process of globalisation<sup>4</sup>. Precisely, among public policies, those that deal with international development co-operation are characterised by a disproportionate gap between, on the one hand, their opacity for the public, and on the other hand their relevance regarding this very public's concern about global « bads » (epidemics, threats to the environment, financial instability and crises, human trafficking, etc.) as well as global « goods » (the call for greater justice at the global level)<sup>5</sup>. The OECD/Council of Europe report found that so far the consensus on the strategic importance of reaching the UN Millennium Development Goals remained largely confined to elite in government circles. There are only a few countries where national governments substantially support the efforts of UN agencies to inform the public<sup>6</sup>. According to the authors the MDGs, as political targets of the “development community” worldwide ædeveloping countries, donor governments, international organisations, NGOs provide a yardstick to assess progress made towards the reduction of poverty, and a focus that should help them communicate more effectively about the complex realities of development and poverty. As the OECD/Council of Europe report shows, however, this is hardly the case yet: the MDGs so far largely remain an un-tapped opportunity for pegging more vigorous efforts to inform and engage the public.

In the Netherlands, the NCDO (National Committee for International Cooperation and Sustainable Development) works to deepen the level of public - awareness about international co-operation. The NCDO developed a policy framework to increase the participation of Dutch ‘World Citizens’ in the achievement of the Millennium Goals. The NCDO undertook, in 2003, a base-level survey to determine the awareness of the Dutch public (16 years and older) of the Millennium Goals.

This NCDO survey coincided with an initial review at the OECD Development Centre of public awareness surveys in four other member countries of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC). The countries included in the study are Canada (2002), Sweden (2002), the United Kingdom (1999-2002) and the United States (2002)<sup>8</sup>. The NCDO survey adds to the findings of these earlier studies. However, each survey is slightly different in terms of methodology, questions asked about the Goals, timing, and representivity, therefore hindering true cross-country comparison.

### 2.1 Has the general public in the Netherlands heard of the MDGS?

The survey question on respondents' awareness of the MDGs was formulated without reference to the United Nations. The UN was, at the time of the survey, in the midst of political controversy between member countries regarding the preparation of a war against Iraq. NCDO therefore intended to avoid biasing the question towards the UN in terms of how the response on the MDGs might be affected by individuals' sentiments towards the UN during that period. The formulation of the question was: *Three years ago leaders of all countries have agreed on a number of development goals to be realized by 2015. These are goals that together form an important development program for poorer people and countries in the world. Did you hear something about it?*

Very little awareness about the MDGs could be measured. Only 10 percent of the respondents indicated to have heard of them (yes eight percent; believe so two percent). Respondents (the 10 percent who were aware of the existence of the MDGs) were then asked what they had heard about the MDGs. Correct replies included:

- Improve the food situation (31 percent)
- Education for children (26 percent)
- Improvement of the water supply (25 percent)
- Health care, fight diseases (18 percent)
- Open trading (8 percent)
- Environment/energy (4 percent)
- Improve housing (3 percent)

Other answers were: Help needy people (9 percent); Novib (Dutch Oxfam), Unesco, Unicef (7 percent).

A large majority of the 10 percent of respondents (92 percent) who are aware of the MDGs know at least one correct goal.

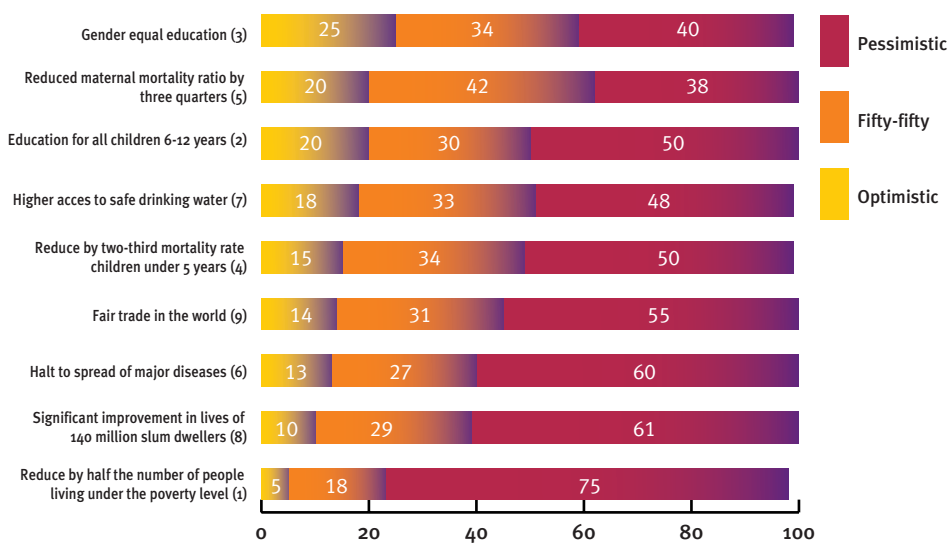
## 2.2 Does Dutch public opinion think the MDGs will be achieved?

The replies to the survey question regarding whether any of nine goals/targets could be reached were given on a 5-point scale of probability. The scale ranged from zero percent (no chance), about 25 percent (small chance), about 50 percent (fifty-fifty chance) to 75 percent (large chance) and 100 percent (success ensured).

In Figure 1 the selection of 75 percent to 100 percent expectation is reported as a *positive/optimistic expectation*, selection of 50 percent is reported fifty-fifty chance of achievement, and 25 percent to zero percent as *pessimistic/negative expectation*. The *Don't Know* reply had a score of one percent and lower and so is not included in the graph.

Figure 1

### Rate of Expectation of Reaching the MDGs in the Netherlands in 2003



Source: NCDO Survey (2003) by ibt MarketResearch

Note: The numbers between brackets correspond to the MDGs and targets as formulated by the NCDO (See Box 1).

## THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

### The Millennium Development Goals as on the UNDP website

[www.undp.org/mdg](http://www.undp.org/mdg)

The Global Challenge: Goals and Targets.

For each goal one or more targets have been set, most for 2015, using 1990 as a benchmark.

**1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger**

Target for 2015: Halve the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day and those who suffer from hunger.

**2. Achieve universal primary education**

Target for 2015: Ensure that all boys and girls complete primary school.

**3. Promote gender equality and empower women**

Targets for 2005 and 2015: Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015.

**4. Reduce child mortality**

Target for 2015: Reduce by two thirds the mortality rate among children under five.

**5. Improve maternal health**

Target for 2015: Reduce by three-quarters the ratio of women dying in childbirth.

**6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases**

Target for 2015: Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.

**7. Ensure environmental sustainability**

Targets:

- Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources.
- By 2015, reduce by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water.
- By 2020 achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.

**8. Develop a global partnership for development**

Targets:

- Develop further an open trading and financial system that includes a commitment to good governance, development and poverty reduction – nationally and internationally

- Address the least developed countries' special needs, and the special needs of landlocked and small island developing States.
- Deal comprehensively with developing countries' debt problems.
- Develop decent and productive work for youth.
- In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries.
- In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies – especially information and communications technologies.

The MDGs in the NCDO survey were formulated differently from the original UN MDGs to shorten the text and make it easier to comprehend for respondents in a survey by telephone.

1. In 2015 the number of people in the world that live under the poverty level will be reduced by half.
2. In 2015 all children between 6 and 12 years will receive primary education.
3. In 2015 as many girls as boys will worldwide go to school.
4. In 2015 the mortality rate among children under five is reduced by two thirds.
5. In 2015 the maternal mortality ratio in every developing nation will be reduced by three quarters.
6. Before 2015 there will be a halt to the spread of aids, malaria and other major diseases.
7. In 2015 the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water is reduced by half.
8. Before 2020 achieve significant improvement in lives of at least 140 million slum dwellers.
9. Before 2015 there will be international cooperation on 'fair trade' in the world.

Figure 1 indicates that the Dutch public is more pessimistic than optimistic about the achievement of the MDGs in general. However, an examination of attitudes towards reaching specific goals or targets reveals a somewhat different picture.

There is an important share of optimistic expectation about:

- Gender equal education and education for all children aged 6 to 12 years.
- A strongly reduced maternal mortality rate.
- Higher access to safe drinking water.

Optimism at a lower level is found for:

- A strongly reduced mortality rate among children under five years.
- Fair trade in the world.
- A halt to the spread of major diseases.

The public is pessimistic about:

- A significant improvement in the lives of a large number of slum dwellers.

And very pessimistic about:

- The reduction by half of people living under the poverty level.

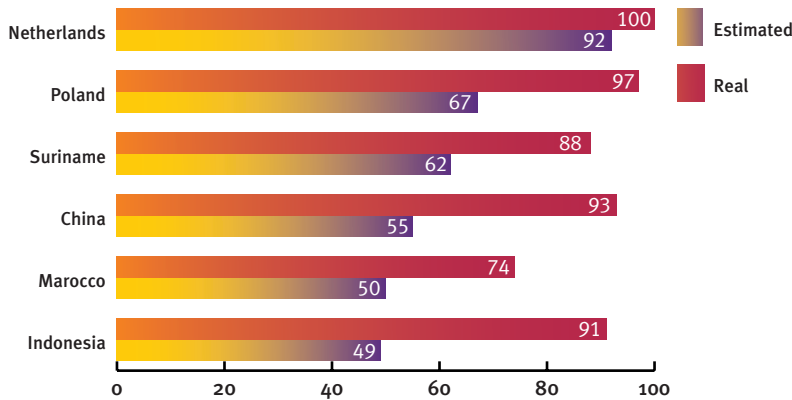
The two latter targets/goals, especially the latter on halving the number of people living in poverty, are apparently seen by the Dutch public as too large and too complex to be achieved. What is not indicated in the graph is the finding that women seem to be more optimistic than men about the likelihood that the MDGs will be achieved.

# Participation in primary education

A number of questions were also asked in the survey in order to better situate the level of optimism of Dutch public opinion about the MDGs in relation to its general opinion and awareness about primary education enrolment rates in a number of countries. Figure 2 reports the respondents' replies in terms of the estimated enrolment rate and the real rate. The figure shows that estimations about enrolment rates are significantly lower than that indicated by the actual rate. There is a much greater difference between the two categories for all countries in the sample except for the Netherlands. Respondents therefore have an exaggerated perception of the education needs in developing countries. This perception is especially remarkable when we recall that there is such large optimism about the achievement of the education targets (*gender equal education and education for all children between 6 and 12 years*).

Figure 2

**Estimated and Actual Enrolment Rates in Primary Education in Six Countries<sup>8</sup>**  
(percent)



Source: NCDO Survey (2003) by ibt MarketResearch

# 4

## The Netherlands as compared to four other OECD DAC Members

Public opinion surveys of awareness and attitudes about the MDGs have been undertaken in four other DAC Member countries: Canada (2002), Sweden (2002), the United Kingdom (1999-2002) and the United States (2002). The NCDO survey was conducted in April 2003<sup>9</sup>. The surveys were commissioned by the development co-operation agency in all countries except for the United States. The United Kingdom is the only country to have monitored opinion on the MDGs for a number of years (started in 1999 – International Development Targets (IDTs) at this stage).

Each survey is different in terms of methodology, questions asked about the MDGs, timing, and representivity. The United Kingdom, Sweden and the Netherlands are all representative polls, Canada conducted focus group research and the United States undertook both focus group research and a general survey. As such, the research cannot be easily compared across countries. This section will however present the results for each goal in a lightly comparative way.

### 4.1 Has the general public heard of the MDGS?

The Canadian, the American and the Swedish polls did not include a recognition question for the MDGs. All respondents were informed of the goals and subsequently asked to express an opinion about them.

In DFID's 2000 survey, respondents were told that *the world's governments have agreed to a set of international development targets (IDTs), sometimes known as the 2015 targets* and then continued to ask respondents if they had heard of these targets. Seven percent of the survey population had heard of the IDTs. This question was repeated in 2001 and there was a decrease to five percent of respondents saying they thought they had heard of them. In both years, one percent of respondents who said that they had heard of the targets were able to correctly mention what these targets were. In 2001 two percent described something other than the targets.

The NCDO survey included a similar question on the recognition of the MDGs. The Dutch public seemed to be slightly better informed: eight percent said they had heard of the goals and another two percent responded to *believe to have heard about the MDGs*, therefore 10 percent have some degree of awareness of the goals. A control question asked of this 10 percent indicated that 92 percent indeed was able to mention one or more of the goals or targets. These correct replies included the goal to half the number of people without access to safe drinking water and this specific goal was identified more than the other MDGs. This was probably linked to the fact that the NCDO survey was held shortly after the World Water Forum (Kyoto, Japan, March 2003).

Respondents to DFID's 2001 survey were able to describe an additional target to the three targets already identified in 2000. In sum they were able to describe in 2000 and 2001 (i) lifting 600 million people out of poverty; (ii) ensuring access to primary education; and (iii) enabling all countries to take care of their natural resources, and the fourth in 2001 (iv) ensuring that there is a two thirds reduction in the number of children dying under the age of five.

DFID stopped asking questions seeking recognition of the goals in 2002 because of awareness being so low in previous years. Instead, respondents were told about the MDGs and were then asked for their opinion on how possible it would be to reach them<sup>10</sup>. The answer frames were also changed from those of previous years – from very possible, etc. to goal achieved by the year 2015, significant progress made towards achieving the goal by the year 2015, some progress made and no progress made.

#### **4.2 Does public opinion think the MDGs will be achieved?**

Generally speaking public opinion in Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States is not overoptimistic about any of the goals being achieved. Very low percentages of respondents answered that they *will be achieved or are definitely achievable*. No more than one third of Americans will say any goal is *most likely* to happen and while up to 70 per cent of British people think that progress can be made on the goals, the highest percentage of respondents who thought any target was achievable was 11 per cent.

No questions were asked in the NCDO survey on the achievement of the complete set of MDGs, but on the each of them separately. The Dutch public is rather optimistic (25 percent) about the achievement of gender equality in edu-

cation and quite pessimistic (5 percent) about the probability that poverty will be halved in 2015. The rates of optimism-pessimism about the other MDGs find their places between the five and 25 percentage points. Generally speaking, approximately 16 percent of the Dutch public is quite optimistic about the achievement of the MDGs and 53 percent is overly pessimistic.

Similarly, only two percent of respondents in Sweden are sure that it is possible to halve poverty in the world by 2015 and a further eight per cent think it is *probable*. The Swedes, like the British and the Americans, think that all the goals are important although some goals are considered to be very urgent by more respondents (Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6 provide an overview of attitudes in each country).

As in the Netherlands, the US public prioritises those MDGs as most important that are also the goals the US public expects to be most likely to be achieved by 2015. For example, increasing access to safe drinking water and universal primary education are rated highest in priority, and are thought to be the goals most likely to be achieved by 2015.

In the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Sweden, men tended to be more negative than women about the likelihood of achieving the MDGs, where a larger proportion of men said that they were not at all possible. Young people in all countries (16-29) tended to be more optimistic about achieving the goals.

Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6 Perceptions in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States and Sweden about the Urgency, Importance and Possibility of Achieving the Millennium Development Goals in 2002/03.

Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6

**Perceptions in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States and Sweden about the Urgency, Importance and Possibility of Achieving the Millennium Development Goals in 2002/03.**

Figure 3

**Rate of Expectation of Reaching the MDGs in the Netherlands 2003**

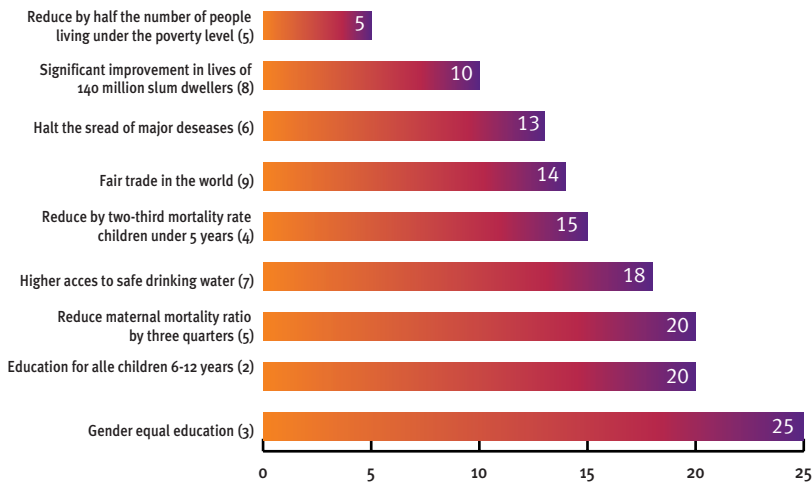


Figure 4

**Proportion of Brith respondents thought each of MDGs would be achieved by 2015 in 2002**

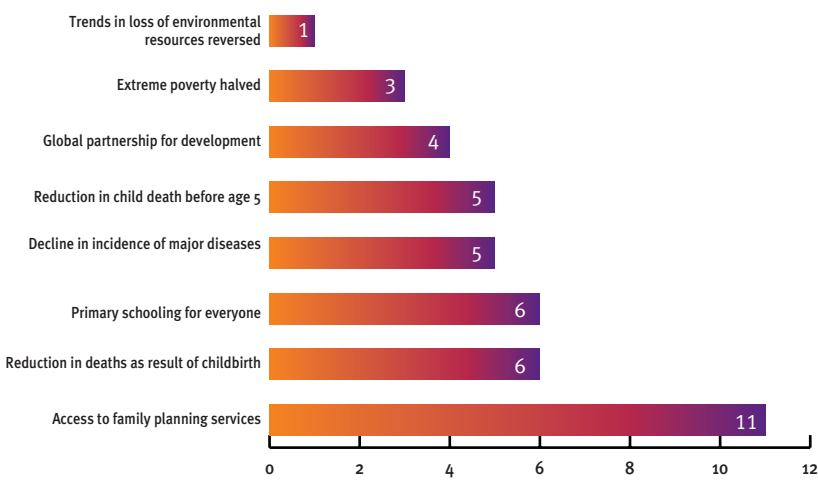


Figure 5

**Importance of Goals and/or Targets & how likely they are to happen to a sample of Americans in 2002 (percentage)**

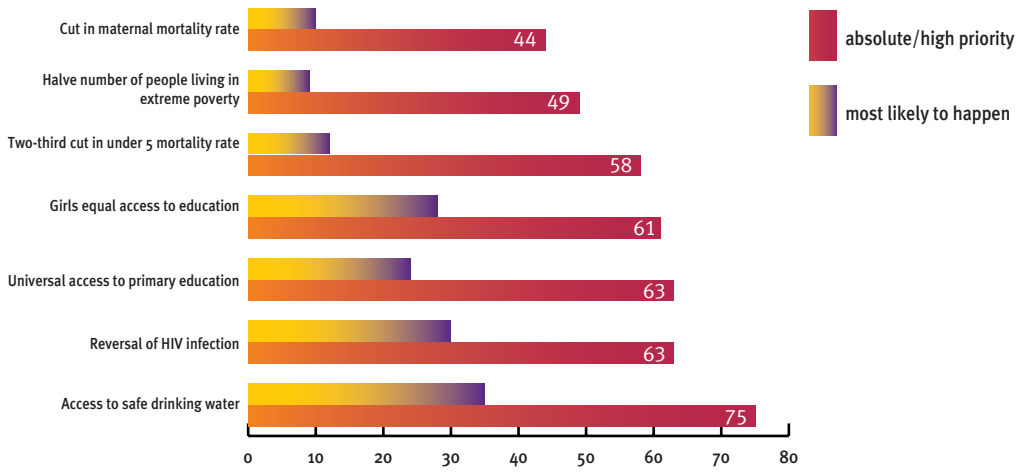
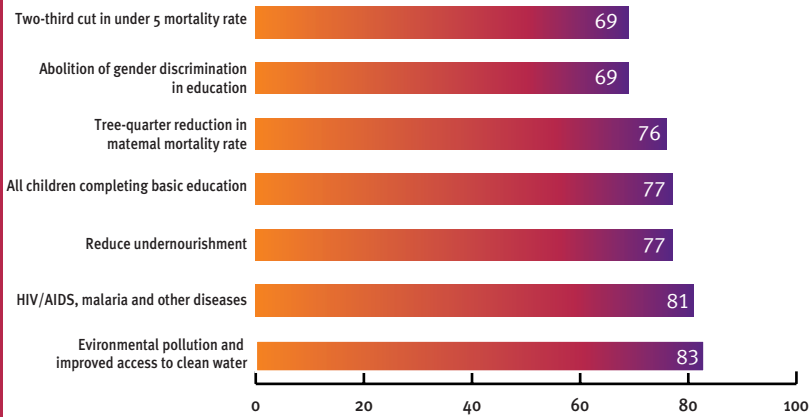


Figure 6

**Degree of importance (very urgent) of the MDGs in Sweden in 2002 (percentage)**



With a slight exception for the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, it is difficult to undertake a comparative analysis of the perceptions and attitudes in these four countries. Nevertheless, these figures do tell a story and some links can be made between each country. The most obvious is access to safe water and prevention of HIV/AIDs and other diseases which are the two top priorities in Sweden and the United States. A link could possibly be made between them and the position of the environment in the United Kingdom where British respondents are very pessimistic about this goal. It would be interesting to see if respondents placed greater priority on this goal because they think it is least likely to be achieved or vice versa. A comparison between the United Kingdom and the Netherlands (Figures 3 and 4) shows that the Dutch public is approximately three times more optimistic about the achievement of individual goals/targets than the British public. This is especially the case for the reduction of under-five mortality, the reduction of maternal mortality and universal primary education.

#### **4.3 Financing for the Millennium Development Goals**

Financing questions have only been asked in Canada. There, many participants in the focus groups suggested allocating from 20-50 per cent of Canada's aid budget to the MDGs, even if this means that Canada will get less direct acknowledgement for its assistance. If a greater share of aid was spent on the MDGs the Canadians would like to be given a clear indication of how the money is going to be spent, by whom and the trade-offs with other parts of the aid programme.

The Swedes were asked about the importance of Sweden taking part in the work to reach the goals and nine out of every ten Swede believes that it is important that Sweden be involved.

#### **4.4 Summary of International Comparison**

- There is very little awareness about the existence of the MDGs. Earlier DFID surveys demonstrated this and a survey in 2003 in the Netherlands confirms this.
- Public opinion is not convinced that the goals will be achieved.
- People are least convinced about achieving environmental sustainability and halving extreme poverty.
- More than a majority of respondents (when asked in Sweden and the United States) think that all goals are a priority.

- Public opinion tends to be most optimistic about reaching the target of access to safe drinking water in the United States access to family planning in the United Kingdom and the education goals in the Netherlands.
- Canadians are sceptical about the existence of so many goals and targets. They think that they are somewhat vague.
- Women and young people are more optimistic about achieving the goals than men and older age groups.

# Summary of the Dutch Survey and Policy Conclusions by the NCDO

The NCDO survey (2003) found very low awareness rates of the MDGs among the Dutch public. The 10 percent minority that has heard of them however, can mention one or more of the goals or targets correctly. In general, the Dutch public is more pessimistic than optimistic about the achievement of the MDGs. Nevertheless, a relatively strong optimism exists for four goals/targets:

- Gender equality in education
- Education for all children from 6 to 12 years
- A strongly reduced maternal mortality rate
- Higher access to safe drinking water

A lower level of optimism exists about:

- A strongly reduced mortality rate among children under five years.
- Fair trade in the world.
- A halt to the spread of major diseases.

The public in the Netherlands is pessimistic/negative about the possibility of reaching two goals/target, one of these being the overall poverty reduction goal:

- A significant improvement in the lives of a large number of slum dwellers.
- Halving the number of people living under the poverty level.

These two goals are apparently perceived as too large and too complex to be achieved.

The estimated enrolment rates in primary education are significantly lower than the actual rates indicate. That renders the relative large optimism about achieving the goals: *gender equal education and education for all children between 6 and 12 years* even more remarkable.

Today's world is full of bad news, conflicts, disasters, and emergencies, especially the news covered by the media. The Millennium Development Goals were established with a vision for longer period of time. At this point in time

they are not a constituent part of daily news coverage. However, once positive developments in working towards the achievement of these goals are made, they may well be presented as background news.

The public, although according to media sources often interested in everything that goes wrong, also likes to hear about success. Successes are expected most strongly on the specific goals that are more recognisable such as education and health, by coincidence perhaps they are also the goals where more progress is expected. This expectation could motivate the public towards acting to support their particular achievement.

As the 2003 OECD/Council of Europe report indicates the Millennium Development Goals provide a yardstick to assess progress made in development co-operation as well as a real focus on issues that should help communicators to communicate more effectively about the complex realities of development and poverty.

NCDO has decided to focus its communication and information activities in 2003 and 2004 on the basis of the findings in its initial survey in spring 2003. Particular emphasis will be placed on the education and health goals. In 2004, the goal of access to reproductive health will also become a central area of focus – ten years after the Cairo Summit on Population and Development.

# Notes and References

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- 2 See Yankelovich, D. (1991), *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*, Syracuse University Press, New York, and Klingemann, H. D, and A. Römmele, (eds), (2002), *Public Information Campaigns and Opinion Research. A Handbook for the Student and Practitioner*, Sage Publications, London.
- 3 See Overseas Development Institute (1999), *What Can We Do With A Rights-Based Approach To Development?* Briefing Paper No. 3, September, ODI, London. ([www.odi.org.uk/briefing/3\\_99.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/briefing/3_99.html)) and the UN website [www.unhcr.ch/development/approaches.html](http://www.unhcr.ch/development/approaches.html). See also the European Strategy Framework for Increasing and Improving Global Education to the Year 2015, recently adopted at the Europe-wide Global Education Congress 2002.
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- 5 See Smillie, I. (1998) "Public support is high but shallow because there is a lack of awareness and understanding about development co-operation in Smillie, I. and H. Helmich, (eds), (1998), *Public attitudes and International Development Cooperation*, North-South Centre of the Council of Europe & OECD Development Centre, OECD, Paris.
- 6 For example in the United Kingdom, Norway, and Sweden.
- 7 NCDO commissioned *ibt MarketResearch* in Amsterdam to carry out the research. The research topics were: *General awareness of Development Goals as agreed on by world leaders in the year 2000* and *Expectations regarding the realisation of each of the MDGs*. The survey was designed and set up under the supervision of Piet van Harn, NCDO staff member and Tom van Veen, an independent senior researcher, presently living in and working from Kenya. The survey was conducted by telephone (almost 100% of Dutch household have a telephone) from a central location in Amsterdam with a nationally representative sample of n=751 persons of 16 years and older. The fieldwork took place during the first week of April 2003.  
The OECD Development Centre's analysis of public attitudes to the MDGs was conceived as a complementary part of a project on questioning Public Opinion about the MDGs [POP Project]. This project was supported by the development co-operation agencies of Canada (CIDA), Sweden (Sida) and Germany (BMZ).
- 8 The 'actual' enrolment rates (1999/2000) in primary education for the six countries are taken from the 'Social Watch Report 2003'.
- 9 References: DFID (1999), *Poverty in Developing Countries*, ONS Omnibus Survey Module 236 for Department for International Development, United Kingdom; DFID (2000), *Public Attitudes on Development (Beliefs and Attitudes concerning poverty in developing countries)*, National Omnibus Survey for the Department for International Development, United Kingdom; DFID (2001), *Public Attitudes on Development (Beliefs and Attitudes concerning poverty in developing countries)*, National Omnibus Survey for the Department for International Development, United Kingdom; DFID (2002), *Public Attitudes towards Development (Knowledge and Attitudes concerning poverty in developing countries)*, National Omnibus Survey for the Department for International Development, United Kingdom; Public Opinion Strategies and Talmey-Drake research and strategies (2002), *Better World Campaign Survey*, Better World Campaign, United States; Sida (2002), *Millenniemålen – en attityundersökning bland allmänheten*, Sida, Stockholm.
- 10 DFID switched to using the MDGs (from IDTs) in 2002 and included Goal 8 in the MDG listing.