



# MOBILISING PUBLIC OPINION AGAINST GLOBAL POVERTY

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Citizens in OECD countries quite unambiguously support more solidarity and justice at the international level; however, despite the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by their governments in 2000, they remain insufficiently informed and educated about global development challenges. With increased understanding of the issues, citizens could provide greater support for more efficient and coherent development policies as well as for more funding. This requires new efforts by national authorities to report on desirable outcomes and on the results and effectiveness of international development policies towards achieving them.

Development Centre work reveals that public support in OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Member countries for helping poor countries has remained consistently high for almost two decades. Donations from the public to development and emergency NGOs have been increasing, while public concern about aid effectiveness has not hurt continued strong support for official development assistance (ODA).

People's understanding of poverty and development issues, however, remains very shallow, and public awareness about ODA and development co-operation policies is also low.

For most people the media provide the primary source of information about developing countries, although there is some evidence of scepticism about its nature. Meanwhile, official expenditure on communication about national aid programmes and development policies remains low. Yet, the more people are aware of development co-operation, the more they support it. Better educated, young and urban dwelling individuals are stronger supporters.

## The Case for Aid: The Public's Motives across OECD DAC Member Countries

- ◆ A majority of Japanese see Africa and South Asia as priority regions for ODA because of poverty and malnutrition.
- ◆ In Australia, moral responsibility is the main motive behind aid; greater support is expressed for long-term development aid than for emergency aid; reducing poverty is regarded as one of the most important issues facing the world today.
- ◆ Over 80 per cent of Austrians support aid because it is the right thing to do; natural disasters are one of their main concerns.
- ◆ Canadians are the most comfortable with foreign aid for basic human needs. At the same time, they place the greatest importance on protection of the global environment and world peace as foreign policy goals.
- ◆ For 68 per cent of the survey population in Britain, poverty eradication in developing countries is a moral issue.
- ◆ Combating world hunger receives greatest support in the United States.
- ◆ In Switzerland, although humanitarian aid is supported by more respondents than development co-operation, both receive very high levels of support (92 per cent and 80 per cent respectively).
- ◆ Voluntary contributions in Italy target three priorities: medical research, war victims and emergency aid. Solidarity actions with developing countries rank fourth.

*Policy Insights #2* is based on data updated from I. Mc Donnell, H.-B. Solignac-Lecomte and L. Wegimont (2003) *Public Opinion and the Fight against Poverty*, an OECD Development Centre Study produced jointly with the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe.

The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the OECD, the Development Centre or their member countries.

## Achieving the Millennium Development Goals requires new, strong democratic support

Achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will require increased *volumes* of official development assistance (ODA), improved *aid effectiveness*, and greater *coherence* of policies for development from OECD member countries. These require new and strong democratic support from their citizens for the following reasons:

i) Public awareness and understanding of public policies are desirable *per se* in democratic countries. In the case of international development, this necessity goes beyond the argument of accountability to taxpayers: the welfare and security of citizens in OECD countries are at stake:

"[...] in an increasingly interdependent world, it is not just the people in developing and transition countries receiving assistance who are made better off by actions which fight environmental, social, cultural and political problems that may ultimately respect no borders. The public are "shareholders" in the sense that it is their taxes which fund aid programmes and their elected representatives who monitor aid policies, management and implementation. The "return" the public receive on their investment is increased prosperity and human security throughout the world" (Chang, Fell and Laird, 1999)

ii) Information, consultation and active participation of citizens, as *partners* of governments, can improve both the *legitimacy* and the *efficiency* of public policies. Further, taking advantage of the expertise and policy-relevant ideas of civil society can contribute to building public trust in government (OECD, 2001 and 2003). Although development and humanitarian NGOs have played important roles in the implementation of public international development policies, there remains ample scope for further involvement, including the business sector and local governments.

iii) The "development community" in DAC member countries – Ministers, aid agencies, NGOs, etc. – will not be able to mobilise new resources and effectively pursue more coherent policies for poverty reduction and development unless people (voters, charity givers) are convinced that this is the right thing to do.

## People are overwhelmingly supportive of international development co-operation in principle ...

An update of the data for 2001, originally published in Mc Donnell *et al.* (2003), confirms the continued increase in support of development aid in all DAC member countries but three (Figure 1). Europeans in particular are increasingly supportive: in 2002, 85.5% of them believed development co-operation to be either "very" or "rather" important, compared with 75.8% in 1998; taken in isolation, the category answering "very" important even increases from 28.1% in 1998 to 45.7%, a rise of 17.6 percentage points.

Polling or monitoring of public attitudes towards aid and other international development policy issues needs to become more systematic. The data on OECD DAC Member countries is still largely limited to measuring public support for the *principle* of giving aid in general, and public satisfaction with levels of official aid. None the less, they do confirm that there is no sign of general aid "fatigue" among the public.

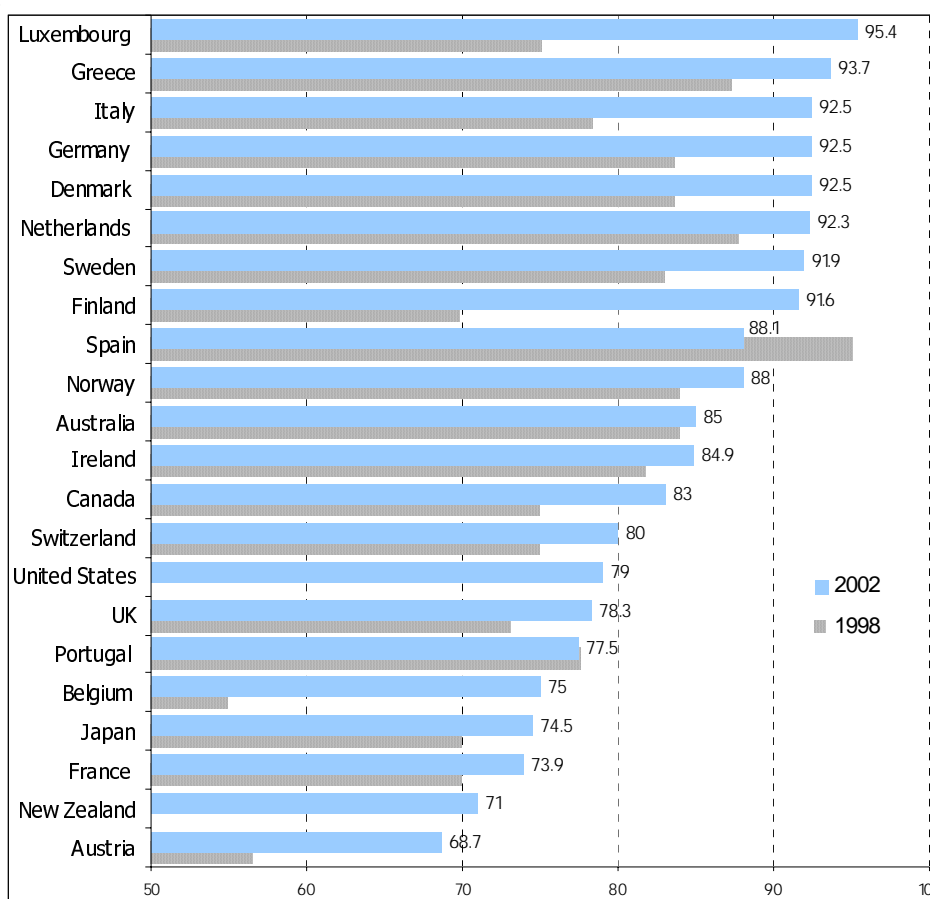
The main argument of the small segment of respondents who do not support ODA is that "we should solve our own problems of poverty, unemployment and economy". There is also suspicion that aid does not lead to poverty reduction or go to the neediest, but instead benefits corrupt governments. However, most survey respondents, in a majority of DAC member countries, favour an increase in ODA. Updated figures from Mc Donnell (*op. cit.*) confirm that trend.

## ... but awareness of international development policies remains low

"Public support is a mile wide and an inch deep"  
(Smillie *et al.*, 1999).

When considering the MDGs, early results from polls in Canada, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the US reveal that there is very little awareness about their existence. When people do know about the MDGs, they are sceptical about their being achieved, especially those concerning the environment and halving extreme poverty. There are also wide country differences; if Swedish and US respondents give priority to all eight MDGs, Canadians think the goals are too numerous and too vague. Women and young people, however, tend to be more optimistic than men and the older age groups.

Figure 1. **Public Support for Development Assistance / the Principle of Helping Poor Countries**  
(2002 and 1998; in percentage)



Notes: all figures (2002;1998) except Australia (2001; 1998), Japan (2001; 1998), New Zealand (1999), United States (2000).

Table 1. **OECD/DAC Donors Expenditure on Information and Development Education, 2001-2002**  
(\$ million)

Country	Year	Total spending	Variation over previous year	Per cent of total ODA*	Expenditure per capita (\$)
Belgium	2001	16.0	+	1.85	1.56
Netherlands	2002	31.5	+	1.00	1.95
Ireland	2002	2.6	+	0.92	0.68
Sweden	1999	14.7	-	0.90	1.66
Canada	2001	11.6	+	0.74	0.37
Denmark	2001	9.9	+	0.62	1.85
Spain	2000	7.3	+	0.61	0.18
Austria	2001	2.6	-	0.57	0.32
Norway	2001	7.5	+	0.56	1.67
Switzerland	2000	4.2	-	0.47	0.58
EC***	2000	19.4	+	0.40	0.05
Finland	2002	1.17	+	0.3	0.23
Italy	2000	3.7	+	0.27	0.06
United Kingdom	2002	9.7	+	0.21	0.16
Australia	2002	1.4	+	0.17	0.07
New Zealand	1999	0.2	+	0.16	0.06
Germany	2001	3.2	+	0.07	0.04
Japan	2002	6.3	+	0.07	0.05
France**	1998	2.2	n.a.	0.04	0.04
United States	2002	0.7	Stable	0.007	0.003
Greece	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Luxembourg	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Portugal	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
<b>Total</b>		<b>151</b>			

Notes: (\*) From DAC Development Co-operation Reports (relevant years). ODA estimations for 2001 were also used for 2002. (\*\*) France: co-financing to NGOs for development education projects. (\*\*\*) EU budget line B-7-6000 funding only for NGOs.

Source: Mc Donnell *et al.* (2003).

More generally, people tend to overestimate their government's aid effort considerably. When asked how much their government spends on overseas aid, approximately one third of Europeans stated that they did not know. Another third estimated aid volumes between 1-5 per cent and 5-10 per cent of GNI. The smallest proportion replied less than one per cent (Eurobarometer), whereas, in reality, rates vary between 0.20% and 0.96%. Similarly, a majority of Americans believe that around 20 per cent of the Federal Budget is spent on foreign assistance. An even greater majority proposes as appropriate amounts of ODA that are much larger than the actual expenditure. Only a minority feel that one per cent of the US budget would be excessive (PIPA), apparently unaware that the true figure is far lower.

In most cases, support for foreign aid is based upon the erroneous assumption that it will be spent on humanitarian crises. However, starting from a very low base, any additional information makes a substantial difference in people's assessment of the issues. Several surveys show an increase in the number of respondents pointing to non-aid policies such as international trade, debt relief and good governance in recipient countries as solutions for poverty reduction (Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom).

### The global anti-poverty consensus: a well kept secret?

Many development agencies find it difficult to communicate with and educate the public beyond annual reports and official statements. There is limited officially-led public discussion about ODA levels, and in most countries NGOs tend to be more effective than governments at promoting development. National expenditure on development education and information remains extremely low. Only in Belgium does it exceed one per cent of the ODA budget (Table 1).

1. This was the stated intention of the DAC in its 1996 selection of the objectives that led to the MDGs.

### Further Reading and References

- Chang, H.S., A.M. Fell and M. Laird (1999), *A Comparison of Management Systems for Development Co-operation in OECD/DAC Members*, OECD-DCD(99)6, Paris:OECD ([www.oecd.org/dac](http://www.oecd.org/dac))
- Mc Donnell, I., H.-B. Solignac-Lecomte and L. Wegimont (2003) *Public Opinion and the Fight against Poverty*, OECD Development Centre / North-South Centre: Paris (order from [www.oecd.org/dev/opinion](http://www.oecd.org/dev/opinion)).
- Mc Donnell, I., H.-B. Solignac-Lecomte and L. Wegimont (2003) *Public opinion Research, Global Education and Development Co-operation Reform*, Development Centre Working Paper 222, Paris:OECD ([www.oecd.org/dev/opinion](http://www.oecd.org/dev/opinion)).
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- Smillie, I. and H. Helmich in collaboration with T. German and J. Randel (eds.) (1999), *Stakeholders: Government-NGO Partnerships for International Development*, Earthscan UK.
- Millennium Campaign: [www.undp.org/mdg/campaign.html](http://www.undp.org/mdg/campaign.html)
- Euro-barometer: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/public\\_opinion/](http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/)
- Program on International Policy Attitudes: [www.pipa.org/](http://www.pipa.org/)

As measurable, time-bound targets, the MDGs are intended to provide an effective new communications tool<sup>1</sup>. It is therefore striking that development actors are not making more use of their potential. As a result, the global official anti-poverty consensus has not trickled down to national public debates.

There are, however, some signs of a growing effort to raise international public awareness on the MDGs. Expenditure in this area is rising in a majority of DAC countries and several development agencies are implementing communication strategies on the MDGs. The United Nations Millennium Campaign is gaining momentum, while an international public awareness campaign on the MDGs is currently in the making.

### Proposals for action

National authorities need to co-operate with elected representatives and civil society organisations to:

- Report to citizens on desirable outcomes and the results of international development policies.
- Monitor progress towards expected development outcomes.
- Increase the transparency of international development co-operation policies.
- Harmonise the monitoring of public opinion across DAC member countries.
- Tailor awareness-raising campaigns to national specificities.

## Monitoring public opinion: How to address the data problem?

The development community clearly needs better and more comparable data, in order to gain a deeper insight into public attitude towards development co-operation and to monitor its trends. On the whole, efforts to research and monitor public attitudes in OECD countries *viz.* MDGs and global poverty reduction have been limited and scattered.

Some countries have not conducted any surveys, and, where data exist for several countries for a particular year, questions are phrased differently in each case. Moreover, public opinion polling is notoriously difficult, with responses influenced by lack or misinterpretation of basic information, as well as respondents' perceptions. Most surveys and polls that do exist focus on support for Official Development Assistance (ODA), but they tell us little about awareness and support for MDGs and they fail to bring non-ODA-related policy choices such as trade, debt, and migration policies into the picture. In questionnaires related to ODA, expenditure is rarely compared with that in other sectors, and too little information is given for deeper conclusions to be drawn about individual opinions. Eventually, survey findings can often appear contradictory or ambiguous.

### Current Steps Towards Harmonisation

The informal DAC Heads of Information (HOI) network has developed a set of common questions for DAC Members to use in national surveys<sup>1</sup>. They recommend *i)* including the questions in a broader, nationally representative survey on development co-operation, *ii)* using a standardised methodology and *iii)* centralising the management and implementation of the survey programme. A pilot phase was launched in several countries to refine the initial set of common questions, translate them into national languages and test them in national surveys<sup>2</sup>. The results will be presented at the HOI June 2004 meeting in Stockholm.

### Further work needed

- *Strengthening existing networks* to disseminate best practice in public opinion polling for the MDGs.
- *Further monitoring and analysis* of ongoing survey results in DAC countries, to provide a picture of public awareness and support for the MDGs ahead of the UN Summit in September 2005.
- *Dissemination* of common public opinion polling questions—which may be considered a “public good”—over the internet, so that they can be used on a voluntary basis.
- *Further research* to *i)* bring in an analysis of attitudes in developing countries in a comparative manner and *ii)* analyse best practice in global/development education and citizen advocacy in relation to the MDGs.

1. The original Public Opinion Polling (POP) group comprised agencies from Canada, Germany, Sweden and the United States, together with the OECD Development Co-operation Directorate, UNDP and the OECD Development Centre.
2. POP PLUS, a successor to the POP initiative, was set up by a group of countries (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Sweden, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States) in collaboration with the UN Economic Commission for Europe, UNDP, the UN Millennium Campaign and the World Bank. It is co-ordinated by the OECD Development Centre.



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