

The Emerging Powers and the Changing Landscape of Foreign Aid and Development Cooperation

Public Perceptions of Development Cooperation

Summary Paper 3: POLAND

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Project Background

Most DAC¹ donor governments and development NGOs have a strong interest in the public face of foreign aid and international development. Key issues include:

- Do people think foreign aid is a legitimate expenditure of taxpayer money?
- How much foreign aid do people believe is given, and to whom, in which countries?
- How effective do people think aid is in humanitarian crises, or for poverty reduction, enhancing human development or contributing to security?
- Do people believe that foreign aid provides value for money?
- What purposes do people believe foreign aid serves: moral, humanitarian, developmental, security, commercial and/or geopolitical?

DAC donor governments have to convince an array of taxpayers, voters, parliamentarians, journalists and civil society watchdogs that ODA is a just and effective expenditure. Interest in the public face of development has led to investment in a large number of national and cross-national surveys of how people perceive 'development' and how they understand the 'less developed' world more generally. Critics suggest that we need to be cautious about what these surveys actually measure, e.g., knowledge about development or commitment to aid expenditure. There are also doubts about the validity of cross-national data.

However, to date there has been little or no analysis of what various publics within the range of 'non-DAC' countries think about their foreign aid/development cooperation activities. In this project, we researched the public face of development in **China, India, Poland, Russia and South Africa**. These diverse 'southern' and 'eastern' development partners have a range of historical and contemporary development cooperation policies and practices. In each case, we examined the extent of public awareness of their official development cooperation policies and activities; how this and perceptions of the purpose and legitimacy of development cooperation varied between different segments of the public; and whether or not official development actors and agencies sought to engage with the public.

Research conduct and methodologies

Given the size of this project it was not feasible to conduct large surveys. In Poland and Russia we were able to draw upon existing surveys, but none to date exist in China, India or South Africa. We conducted interviews with government officials; academics and think tank personnel; development NGO workers; private sector interests; and journalists and editors. The balance varied between country settings because of context; for example, in Poland the very heavy involvement of NGOs contrasted to China and India, and shaped our choice of respondents. The second shared approach was print and Internet media analysis. Given the scale of the project and the very different country contexts, this was not standardized across the case studies, but shaped to the circumstances of each one. The project has benefited enormously from the discussions we have had across our five case study countries, but it was not designed to be formally comparative. All of our respondents were interviewed with informed consent, and anonymity was guaranteed unless otherwise agreed.

Full project details can be found at:

<http://www.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/foreignaidperceptions/>

This website also has details of longer academic papers

¹The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) comprises 23 industrialised countries plus the European Union. All are western other than Japan, and since 2010, South Korea.

Poland's foreign aid at a glance

History: During the socialist period Polish development assistance was linked with its membership of Comecon. This involvement was disrupted by the political and economical crises of the 1980s, and after the fall of the USSR, Poland transitioned to become a recipient of international aid. Since 1989 and the beginning of socio-economic reforms, Poland has been subjected to omnipresent development schemes. Once the process of EU accession began, those projects were overtaken by 'adjustment' schemes aimed at transformation of the country in line with 'the EU standards'. As western donors withdrew from the country, Polish NGOs followed them into the Eastern Europe, where they acted as brokers between westerners and local communities. In time they started crafting their own initiatives, which were predominantly based on the idea of 'exporting Polish experiences' of socio-political and economic reforms. Yet it was not until Poland's accession to the EU that national ODA structures were established. At present Polish aid is shaped by its ambition to join the DAC.

Institutions: Among the most important actors influencing ODA are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which manages general development programmes and humanitarian assistance; and the Ministry of Finance (MF), which manages international loans and debt relief. NGOs and church institutions play a very active role, and local and central administration bodies are also involved in development schemes. Recent Polish involvement in Afghanistan has witnessed the rising role of Polish military in the provision of aid.

Modalities: In 2009, Poland's development assistance amounted to \$374.65 million (0.09% of GNI), of which approximately 70% was directed towards multilateral assistance. In 2009, bilateral aid was estimated at \$91.84 million, was mostly composed of preferential loans to China, Angola, Montenegro and Vietnam (administered by the Ministry of Finance). A very important part of Polish Aid's programme is assistance provided via development projects administered by the MFA and implemented by various Polish governmental and non-governmental organisations.

Partners: Poland's focus remains on its regional neighbours. The Polish State defines its priority partners as Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, and Moldova. Projects directed to those countries focus on civil society building, good governance, as well as agricultural development. Other countries prioritised by Polish ODA are Afghanistan, the Palestinian Autonomy, and Angola. Funds for other countries are grouped in joint financial pools comprising the Western Balkans, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America.

Recent debates: One of the most crucial debates relates to the issue of structuring ODA: the creation of relevant legal structures, specialised institutions, and policies that would govern Polish aid more effectively. Another issue concerns the choice of development partners: should Poland get more involved in Africa or continue prioritization of Eastern Europe? Another debate centres on the issue of obtaining public support for international assistance. Development activists expect that the rise in public support would enforce their position in negotiating structural changes within ODA flows and management.

Project findings

What do the public know about Poland's development cooperation?

Since 2004, the MFA has been conducting annually a national public opinion poll: "Poles on Development Assistance". However, the formulation of questions is problematic and reflects the political agenda of those who order the surveys, consequently, they measure the support for the principle of aid rather than the aid itself. This results in the highly optimistic conclusion that 79% (2010) of society supports Polish involvement in foreign assistance. Furthermore, surveys measure the familiarity of the public with the policies and terms promoted by activists themselves, rather than assessing the ways in which publics actually conceive of problems related to development issues. Answers to those questions are less optimistic, showing that the public is not very familiar with existing aid programmes. As a result, Polish activists are trapped between holding onto the illusion of nationwide support for the development paradigm and the lack of interest from the public in development matters. To overcome this paradox, stakeholders put enormous effort into development education schemes.

Development/global education: The ODA budget dedicated to initiatives defined as development education is double the annual aid budget for Angola – the only African priority partner of Polish aid.

The importance of this method in shaping public opinion and gaining support for Polish foreign involvement was confirmed in spring 2011 when the representatives of NGOs, the MFA and the Ministry of National Education signed a memorandum on cooperation in supporting advancing global education in Poland. Within these kinds of educational activities special attention is paid to two forms of reaching the public: through the media, and in specially designed outreach programmes. In both of those instances special discourses legitimizing Polish foreign involvement are being promoted.

Mainstream discourses on Polish involvement in development as presented by development activists: The main discourses framing public debates on foreign assistance reflect debates about Polish self-identification within the global hierarchy of power. The key role in those discussions is played by the conceptualisation of Poland as a country undergoing transformation, making its 'return' to (Western) Europe. However, today the divisions between East and West are still clear and the issue of being perceived both internally and externally as second class citizens of Europe still occupies a big space in public debates. As a result, debate on Polish involvement in international development oscillates around the following notions:

- **Transition from recipient to donor:** The EU accession is presented as a paramount reason and a turning point for the beginning of Polish developmental engagement. The pre-1989 involvement of Poland in development politics is virtually erased from the discussion. The socialist past, associated with 'non-modernity' is being neglected as a 'shameful' reminder of Poland's past, holding back identification of Poland as the West. Instead, a new history of global development is being put forward. This vision results in the country's identification as an 'Emerging Donor' but also as a country historically detached from international relations (since all links from the Comecon era are being erased from public discourse by development activists). What is symptomatic in this approach is the attribution of power and authority to the institutions that represent the Western world. In this context, even though international aid promises the development of others, for Polish actors it becomes yet another attempt to realize their own dream of modernity and to prove their own developed status.
- **Conceptualization of Polish aid through reciprocity theory:** The logic that the gift of aid received by Poland in the 1980s and early 1990s must be returned is one of the strongest discourses used to mobilize and legitimize involvement in international aid. This notion correlates with the idea that Polish society, having experienced being a recipient of aid, might offer alternative approaches to Western development. It is exemplified in the promotion of a language of 'partnership' and 'cooperation' as opposed to 'donors' and 'aid'. This discourse is also linked to the idea of specializing Polish aid around the concept of "Exporting Polish Experiences" of democratic, socio-political transformation. This notion is reflected in the modalities of aid on offer (support for free media, political transformation), as well as regional trajectories of Polish aid (the focus on Eastern Europe). This trajectory receives the most attention from the public. The power of those discourses lies in their ability to mobilize national nostalgia, imagining Poland and Poles as innate 'democracy supporters,' struggling not only in the name of their own liberty but also supporting other nations in their struggles for political justice. It also reflects more recent history and national sentiments related to the Solidarity movement. This form of conceptualizing development, expressed via involvement in Eastern Europe might be also interpreted as the continuation of Poland's extensive historical geo-political interests and the country's colonial expansion and regional power rivalry with Russia.
- **Legitimizing Polish involvement in the world, through celebration of globalization and emphasis on global interconnectivity:** While the discourses above are especially popular, and indeed mobilize support for action in Eastern Europe, what remains problematic is the mobilization of support for aid to Africa. The promotion of discourses of multiculturalism, global interconnectivity and solidarity becomes a way of legitimizing and obtaining support for the Polish involvement in Africa.

Media: The interest of the Polish media in development issues might be considered relatively low. It is only on the occasion of big events such as natural disasters, political conflicts, and visits of Polish high-level officials to developing countries that these issues receive some attention. Development organizations as well as state institutions aim to actively influence the media by inviting journalists to workshops on development and study trips to the project locations. Those initiatives, funded predominantly by NGOs and the MFA through development

education budgets, aim to encourage journalist to produce more material on development issues. As such, these visits often are carefully orchestrated by development stakeholders, and they raise questions about the objectivity of the material produced and the possible loss of journalist independence. At the same time, most such initiatives are addressed predominantly to the one type of media that already shows some interest in foreign issues, i.e., media targeting the well educated middle class and inhabitants of larger cities, while ignoring the press outlets that have the biggest readership but are considered populist.

Outreach programmes: Polish development stakeholders have produced very vibrant and strong global education campaigns. These include workshops, seminars, forums, conferences, concerts and exhibitions as well as schools-orientated educational campaigns. The positive and growing impact of those initiatives has been recognized by the peer-reviewed 2009 GENE report on Global Education in Poland. Development Education programmes are seen as a platform for promoting discourses of global connectivity, but the choice of topics and regions covered and promoted by such initiatives is highly selective and in particular concerns Africa. As such they become platforms for generating public support for Polish involvement on that continent.

Wider observations and policy implications:

Polish NGOs and state officials have great potential and skills to engage with the public and stimulate debates on development issues. However, the existing development education campaigns as well as programmes targeting the media are propagating visions and discourses of development as envisioned by the development activists themselves, rather than stimulating open debate on the issues of global inequality and poverty. Perhaps a key to re-evaluating this approach would be to redesign the public opinion polls that are used by the MFA and NGOs. The inclusion of questions about the ways in which people actually conceive of global problems would be encouraged. The addition of questions about the prioritization of foreign assistance versus other, internally directed policies would allow better understanding of the levels of actual support for Polish international involvement. Also, the inclusion of questions about the economic, social and political background of respondents would be highly informative, and would prevent treating the public as a homogenous entity. This information would also allow testing how the existing, dominant discourses, which are strongly rooted in nationalistic nostalgia, resonate with different age and class groups.

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