# Chapter 6 - Trickle-up in Politics?

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For a domain such as development cooperation, public support and awareness raising become particularly relevant in view of converting ideas and opinions current in society into political support, and eventually into a congruent policy. In this chapter, we first describe what is meant by the term political support. This is followed by an account of our research on the issue in the Belgian political world. A key question here is to which extent political parties are concerned about development cooperation. At the end of this chapter, we briefly sum up the policy implications of the way politics are capturing public support for foreign aid.

## **Public opinion and foreign aid: a blind spot in decision-making theories?**

Political support for foreign aid is not an established concept. In this context we could define it as the willingness and the intention of the political world to convert public opinions and preferences into policy practice. While this definition may seem logical, it leaves many questions unanswered. These opinions and preferences are plural in the first place, which means they may be the subject of debate, conflict and/or compromise. They may originate from public opinion at large, from the community of aid workers and their circles (educators, facilitators, consultants and the likes), or from other sectors in civil society. The ‘political world’ is another term that needs elaborating. In most parliamentary democracies as we know them, the diversity of opinions, interests and value systems are channelled through political parties which come at the fore with programmes that are subject to electoral vote. The outcome of the vote decides who will be in parliament and eventually in government. In an attempt to simplify a genuinely complex system, we could therefore make a distinction between three ‘layers’ which together constitute the political sphere: the political parties, the parliament and the government. In this research, we mainly focus on the first layer, i.e. the political parties.

Conducting empirical research on the manner in which ideas and opinions on foreign aid are converted into political decisions would be greatly served by a plausible hypothesis, derived from equally plausible political theory. Unfortunately, foreign aid seems to be a blind spot in theories on political decision-making. Most authors such as Lasswell (1956) and Dror (1989), who have studied decision-making processes over the years, used to stick with the paradigm of influence exerted by interest groups as their starting point. When the effect of public opinion is at stake, authors like Kinder and Sears (1985) refer to social psychology mechanisms to explain the determinants of vote choices and political beliefs. In these, self-interest, group identification and the effect of leadership appear much more important than values and rational choices. It is often admitted that foreign policy is the odd one out in decision-making processes. Compared to home affairs, foreign policy is determined by tradition, existing alliances, economic interests and security. Foreign aid (or development cooperation) is in a different league of drivers yet again. Generic decision-making theories therefore tend to be less applicable for foreign aid than for other issues.

That is why our empirical research has taken a more inductive turn. The research questions were three-fold. First, we wished to examine the *structural attention*devoted to development cooperation within political parties. The second aim was to understand the *mechanisms* through which political parties interact with and take into account the demands of civil society. Finally, the research intended to explore the *outcome* of civil society’s lobbying on politicians in terms of their vision of development cooperation and their support to civil society and more broadly the public support for development cooperation. In order to answer these questions, a series of semi-structured interviews was carried out with representatives of all democratic political parties and civil society. The civil society actors interviewed included development NGOs, the political NGO platforms representing them (11.11.11 and CNCD) and the NGO federations.

## **The role of civil society in shaping political support for development cooperation**

Even when NGOs do not by definition reflect the public opinion on development cooperation, we took their role as the starting point for our reconstruction of the way public opinion is converted into policy practice. NGOs may see it as their task to influence and to increase awareness of the politicians (Grenade, 2007). They can follow different strategies to achieve this. They can work inside the political system by lobbying, or outside the system by applying pressure through mobilisation of the public. NGOs may question politicians if they fail to realise their announced political projects. If they do not accept the development cooperation view of the political power, NGOs may invite them to adopt different views based on their expertise. NGOs can try to convince politicians via the public sphere. Additionally, NGOs may act proactively in order to induce their vision of development cooperation in the political complex. As non-state actors, NGOs try to influence public policy, either through the parties or directly through the Minister and his or her cabinet.

However, NGOs do not always find themselves in an easy position to implement these strategies. Their relationship with the Belgian administration for development cooperation has a history which is characterised by a certain degree of antagonism (Develtere, Fonteneau & Pollet, 2004). Recognised NGOs have been subsidised by the government at up to 85% of their aid budget, making their projects subject to approval and evaluation (Stangherlin, 2001; Mahy, 2011). Depending on the point of view one adopts, NGOs can be seen as ‘subcontractors’ of the Belgian development efforts, while NGOs themselves will be eager to express their autonomy. Supplementary, complementary and rivalling factors have been the predicates which, in combination, have powered the relationship between the administration and the NGOs (Martens, 2002). It might be a step too far to then delve into the even more complicating factor of rivalry between NGOs.

In a simplified scheme, influencing policy by NGOs could follow four possible strategies:

Chart 4.1 NGO strategies for influencing policy

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Shaping visions | Making decisions |
| From inside | Consulting, staffing of study centres | Lobbying |
| From outside | Informing the public | Denouncing practices |

To explore how NGOs were seeking to influence policy, the research took as a starting point Lasswell’s ‘Stage Model of the policy process’. In this model, Lasswell (1956) highlights the chronological effect of seven stages of the policy decision-making: intelligence, promotion, prescription, invocation, application, termination and appraisal. Drawing from Sutton’s claim that ‘a linear model’ of policy process is not adequate and that policy process should be understood as ‘chaos of purposes and accidents’, we also explored the role of NGOs as interest groups whose aim is to influence policy decision-making in order to impact positively on development cooperation. Sutton (1999) claims that: ‘The policy process is influenced by a range of interest groups that exert power and authority over policymaking. These influences affect each stage of the process, from agenda-setting, to the identification of alternatives, weighing up the options, choosing the most favourable and implementing it’. (Sutton, 1999, p.25).

These insights are important to understand that a scanning of the interaction between civil society and the political world requires a 360° approach. Strategies tend to be dynamic and flexible, adapted to the urgency of the issues, the way forums are established and the current power relations. Our mapping of stakeholders’ views during this research was therefore set up through semi-structured interviews.

### **Generating a vision on development aid within the political parties**

Different political parties have different ways of working and different structures, depending on internal factors such as their size, their experience and their ideology and external factors such as specific societal domain they focus on and whether they are in the government or in the opposition.

In most political parties, the subject of development aid is assigned to an internal expert in this area. Often, these experts were, or still are involved with an NGO related to the party. They are mainly in charge of the decision-making on development cooperation issues within the party. A risk of this pattern is that it can lead to a certain isolation of the ‘expert’ politician, since his or her strong link with development aid makes it more difficult to be involved in other issues often considered more vital for the party’s strategy. This would make the position as ‘expert’ on development cooperation less attractive. In other cases, the responsibility of development cooperation is split among several politicians, either through teams involving politicians and experts in a coordinated way, or through individual politicians each working on a specific topic.

In addition to internal expertise, each of the main parties is associated with a research centre that provides technical advice related to development cooperation. Most of these research centres have a department dedicated to international relations issues. Development cooperation is often considered to be a part of that. Some of the research centres’ staff are policy advisers, other staff are affiliated researchers from academia. The centres’ task comes down to policy-based research and practical support, such as compiling political reports, law preparation, and support for drawing up the party’s ideological base and vision related to development cooperation. According to the experiences of NGO federations, each party has its own internal power relationship which will determine the NGO’s tactics for approaching and lobbying the party. Sometimes, the ‘expert’ will be the first target, in other cases the party leadership will be, and in yet other cases the research centre will be.

One commonly-found type of consultative process among the left and centre parties consists of a two-step approach. Early on in the process, a relatively formally composed group includes politicians as well as people ‘from the field’. Often, NGOs do indeed find a place at this table. Decision-making, however is not the purpose of these gatherings. The idea is more to find inspiration and ideas which could fit in with a party’s programme. Later on in the process, a rather informal group gathers the politicians and ‘internal’ experts at different decision-making levels. This strategic group generally aims to homogenise the party’s policy at these different levels, taking both pro-active and reactive standpoints. These groups, especially the informal ones, play a role when the electoral programme is to be drawn up. In other cases, for instance after the Tsunami in South-East Asia or the earthquake in Haiti, the larger ‘formal’ group is mobilised to organise donation campaigns among party members or affiliates. Some parties have set themselves apart by keeping 1% of the members’ fees back for selected development aid projects.

Several parties report a decrease in the participation by NGOs in such consultation groups, especially over the last decade. NGOs feel there is a decline of the parties’ interest for international relations and are less eager to invest in a domain that is ranked low in the parties’ priority scale anyway. They also blame the tendency of politicians to think about development aid in the framework of more popular issues like immigration, social dumping and the war on drugs. Politicians however defend this approach as a method to draw people’s attention to a topic that otherwise would remain invisible. This gap between the intrinsic values and the hurdles to bring them into practice has created a distance between the political world and civil society. To some extent this explains the hesitation of NGOs to continue their full commitment to consultative processes set up by political parties.

### **How can civil society exert influence on political parties?**

Influencing the content of policies is one of the prime tasks of the umbrella organisations that represent the NGOs and civil society sections with a global solidarity orientation, such as the trade unions (Lambert & De Smedt, 2006). These umbrella organisations, sometimes called NGO networks are 11.11.11 in Flanders and CNCD in the French-speaking part of Belgium.

There is a strong link between the political work of these umbrella organisations, their aim to increase public awareness and their efforts to introduce global issues in the daily routine of civil society organisations. One tool that is frequently used is the memorandum. These memoranda are often the result of extensive study work and discussions within civil society. They deal with topics such as the fight for decent work, food security, or the cancellation of the debt of developing countries. During the election campaign, these memoranda often highlight the positions of the political candidates about North-South issues. Their real use, however, is after the elections. Indeed, one aim of these memoranda is to translate civil society priorities into commitments in the government statement, and further into specific policy of the Minister or Secretary of State who holds the portfolio of development cooperation. Other methods of policy influencing are of a more informal nature, such as petitions, internal lobbying and bilateral contacts with politicians.

To ensure maximum impact, NGO networks need to be perceived as ideologically neutral or, at least, pluralistic. Indeed, the networks ensure that they maintain a diversified membership and take up positions which reflect a fair compromise between these members. However, with most NGOs leaning towards the left and centre, the right-wing parties do not acknowledge such pluralism and are often inclined to reject some of the NGOs’ points of view *a priori*. Representing the NGOs may therefore hold advantages as well as disadvantages for these lobbying networks. On the positive side, they are received in parliament and are in contact with different politicians and with the government. They are considered legitimate, especially because they claim to have no political colours. On the negative side, NGO networks cannot form alliances with specific political parties as it would affect their claim of neutrality.

In terms of the parties’ collective decision-making, the strategies of political parties and NGO networks diverge. Political parties often wish to distinguish themselves from the others and prefer a solitary strategy, for example in proposing new laws or launching new ideas. NGO networks, on the contrary, wish to foster alliances on projects that would gather the support from multiple parties, ensuring the greatest likelihood of being accepted. Networks prefer less ambitious but more pragmatic proposals shared by multiple parties over more ambitious proposals that would give much publicity to one party but with little probability of adoption. This strategy involves serious efforts in trying to bring parties together and looking for consensus before a proposal is launched.

An important parameter for the way political parties can be approached is whether or not they are in the government. When in the government, parties tend to focus on gaining NGO support for political decisions. When in the opposition, parties rather try to identify potential dissatisfaction among NGOs with the government’s policy in order to organise blocking strategies. To interact with society, most parties see NGOs as intermediary structures to connect with citizens’ expectations. NGOs are supposed to feel the societal pulse, bring up the issues and feed the debate.

However, some politicians think that NGOs are better in expressing critique than coming up with practical proposals. Therefore, they also try to lean on trade unions and the so-called 4th pillar, i.e. the citizen initiatives and side-projects of large institutions (De Bruyn & Huyse, 2009; De Bruyn & Godin, 2010). Some politicians feel there should be a more direct link between the political world and the public through the media, thus bypassing the NGOs. It may be questioned, however, the extent to which the media and the opinion makers making use of it actually represent the public.

### **Viewpoints on development cooperation**

Most parties acknowledge the importance of the different levels of decision-making for development cooperation: municipal, regional, federal and European. They advocate respect for the competences of each level. For example, if education is a regional competence, activities coming under ‘development education’ should be a regional competence. While historically the federal level was the main driver for development cooperation, the last decades have witnessed a double movement. On the one hand, the European integration has led to a stronger alignment of the Belgian development cooperation policy to the European guidelines. On the other hand, local governments have increased their interest in development cooperation. The initiatives launched by municipalities, for instance, can be considered as a part of the already-mentioned 4th pillar. This would not mean, however, that the federal level is no longer needed. All parties have recognised a significant role for the federal government, either through principle or from a pragmatic viewpoint. Since for example funding mechanisms for NGOs are located at the national level, even the regionalist parties do not see a reason to change this - at least not in the short term.

All parties also recognise the usefulness of a diversification of operational levels of development aid: bilateral, multilateral, or indirect. Some see clear advantages in multilateral aid, for the scale of impact it may have, or the possibility of denouncing violations of human rights and corruption in a country without having to fear diplomatic incidents. Others have criticised this type of aid for its bureaucracy. Specific national competencies, they claim, can emerge better through bilateral approaches, e.g. the Belgian approach for countries of Central Africa. Indirect aid is in principle supported by all parties, but right-wing parties tend to put more conditions on that type of aid (efficiency, coherence with bilateral aid, etc.). Conditionality, it seems, is also a source of division with regard to bilateral aid: Flemish-speaking parties have traditionally insisted, much more so than French-speaking parties, on the conditions (such as good governance) that should be imposed in exchange for aid. This division can also be seen between the Flemish-speaking and French-speaking NGOs.

There is political consensus on the restriction of the number of partner countries on the basis of predefined criteria to avoid dispersion, and also to differentiate between least developed countries and emerging countries. Least developed countries may be best served through huge financial and logistic investments. On the type of cooperation best suited for emerging countries, opinions seem to differ. Right-wing parties think they need technical and research collaboration. Left-wing parties prefer projects tackling human rights issues and democratisation processes; indirect cooperation (NGOs) are considered to be best placed to set up projects in these domains.

In terms of which socio-economic sectors to support, a left-right divide appears as well. Left-wing parties emphasise social development (health and education) as main areas. They also criticise the imposing of (neo-liberal) ideologically inspired liberalisation policies for local governments (opening of markets, free competition, etc.). Right-wing parties insist on fostering economic development to leverage broader development. Their critique on social development as the prime focus is that it reduces development cooperation to ‘palliative care’, bringing relief but not curing. Both sides blame the other of ‘paternalism’ and sticking to ‘past practices’. A concern they both share however is the need to step out of charity cooperation.

Divergences also appear on how to reach the 0.7% of GDP devoted to development aid. Left-wing parties and NGOs prefer to preserve this budget for ‘pure’ development cooperation projects. Right-wing parties suggest also taking into account the costs of asylum policy and/or the cancellation of debts.

Finally, parties feature divergent discourses on the efficiency of development cooperation. One specific concern of mainly the right-wing parties is the need to improve the transparency on NGO funding, which is to be based on criteria of effectiveness and efficiency. The motive for this concern is that increased efficiency will increase the public support for development cooperation. Parties of the political centre insist on the need for more efficiency in multilateral aid. Most parties see a positive sign in the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness.

## **Implications**

One striking outcome of this research is that NGOs and NGO networks are generally not considered as ‘opposition’ by the political world but rather as informers, specialists and a source of inspiration. At the same time, the input of NGOs is heard early on in the consulting process. When an issue or even the domain of development cooperation at large reaches the ‘inner circle’, the voice of civil society is - when not brushed aside altogether - at best personified by a trusted party delegate. This leads more often than not to development cooperation issues being put lower down on the agenda. To counter this tendency, NGOs could strengthen their position by stipulating that their inspirational and informative input is not for free, but rather a first stage in a process wherein NGOs are involved right towards the output end. This would be to the benefit of NGOs as well as politicians. NGOs would not be reduced to mere sources of inspiration. At the same time politicians would have specialists at the table who would not limit their input to critique but who would collaborate pragmatically to find political solutions to fundamental problems.

An element of this trade-off would be that NGOs and NGO networks do more than just voice criticism. They would then, regardless of political colours, cooperate with political parties or cabinet ministers to design pragmatic alternatives, which could be carried out without upsetting the minister, the government and its electorate. This would certainly imply a change of roles and a change of style, but at the same time increase the actual impact of NGO lobbying.

Politicians and political parties should try to diversify their antennas to the greatest extent possible in order to understand what is current in civil society and society at large with regard to development cooperation. These antennas could naturally be NGOs, NGO networks and other civil society institutions, but they could also be blogs, discussion groups, press releases, columns, research reports and informal dialogue at local community level. Given the fact that a subject like development cooperation is not one that politicians would use to profile themselves for gaining the popular vote, alliances should be sought across the parties in order to have propositions voted.

Finally, this research has made clear that the current decision-making process implies that some aspects of development cooperation are not systematically seen as choices for which alternatives are possible.

* Multilateral aid, and the questionable effectiveness and efficiency of its operating institutions (UN agencies, World Bank, EU) were mentioned by just one interviewee. Yet, about a third of the Belgian ODA is spent through multilateral aid.
* The continuity and predictability of funding is crucially important for the Southern partners’ effectiveness in carrying out projects. Without predictable funding, technical staff may look for other, more stable employment and remaining budgets will be quickly spent while they are justifiable. At present, budgets and projects are often approved at a late stage, leaving Southern partners in the dark about their continuity. In spite of the obvious losses this leads to in terms of aid effectiveness, this issue is not sufficiently highlighted and therefore not remedied.
* The current institutional set-up of aid in itself is never discussed. While it was induced when aid still took the form of one-time projects (water boreholes, building, vaccination campaigns), the reality today is one of processes rather than projects. Project funding responds to an accountability disposition based upon suspicion rather than trust. New cooperation formats will not automatically be suggested by the current development aid institutions. Politicians and their advisers should see it as their task to detect potential for innovations by staying in touch with the public and the myriad channels voicing it.

A regular and thorough examination of the level of support for development cooperation among political parties and the extent to which this support is influenced by the general public, civil society lobbying or technical expertise is therefore a useful avenue of investigation. Also, more systematic comparative research in different countries could unveil alternative approaches for political decision-makers, approaches which would not automatically emerge from inside development actors and institutions.

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