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‘A mile wide and an inch deep’: A review and critique of existing surveys on public opinion and development

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Abstract

Findings from recent surveys of public opinion and development aid show an overwhelming level of support for the principle of aid to poor countries and official development aid. Such findings have buoyed policymakers who have argued that high-levels of support are necessary for increasing aid levels, notably to the 0.7% (ODA/GNI ratio) goal for all OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries. In this paper, we argue that the assumed linkage between public opinion and aid is faulty on several grounds. First, there is no empirical evidence showing positive covariation between public opinion and development aid. Second, measures of public support suffer from poor validity. Third, measures of support do not control for knowledge-levels and perceptions of aid effectiveness. Fourth, there is little understanding of the factors that motivate support for development aid or concern for poverty in the first place. We conclude by arguing for survey instruments that remedy the issues raised above and for targeted development education programmes.

Introduction

Public opinion is deemed to be important in supporting and legitimising government expenditure on bilateral and multilateral aid programmes and for efforts to reform aid. Existing survey data suggests that public support for development assistance is, on average, above 70% and stable since the 1990s. The development community via international organisations and state agencies have committed themselves to monitoring public attitudes because public opinion has been deemed critical for the continued success of development cooperation, and realising the 0.7% (ODA/GNI ratio) goal for all OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries. A 1999 United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Office of Development Studies (ODS) illustrates the point: “the system of international development cooperation – whether we think of the current existing one or a new, expanded one – cannot exist without broad-based political support. Building such support, of course, requires a basic understanding of the nature of people’s – the public’s – attitudes toward international development cooperation” (Stern 1999: v). Consequently, since the mid-1990s, monitoring public support has become common practice for most donor countries and major international organisations.

The UK Department for International Development (DFID) has conducted an annual survey of public attitudes towards development since 1999 and is committed to using strategic communication “to raise public awareness and increase UK public understanding of, and support for, international development. Monitoring public opinion is central to measuring DFID’s success in building support for development” (DFID 2008: 6). The European Union, via Eurobarometer surveys, has also been actively surveying public attitudes since the 1980s, however recently, the *policy* role of surveying the public took on a more central role. In December 2005 the European Union signed a new statement

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on EU development policy providing a framework of common principles for the EU and its Member States to coordinate and harmonise individual Member State and Community development policy. More recently the World Bank has started to pay more attention to public support for development, resulting in a recent working paper examining motivations for support (Paxton and Knack 2008). The World Bank's interest in public support for aid is directly tied to the Bank's triennial IDA replenishment. The Bank is looking for all strategic tools which can be used to persuade governments to commit as much as possible in multilateral aid.¹ The assumption is that politicians will follow public sentiment insofar as it gives them justification for supporting particular policy and budget decisions. Given the expected squeeze on development assistance budgets with economic recession in many of the donor countries this sort of logic will increase the emphasis put on gauging and tapping public support.

Perhaps more importantly, public support for development aid is deemed critical to reforming aid. Whilst much has been done under development cooperation in the past 50 years, the Millennium Development Goals reach maturity in 2015 and serve as a reminder of how much is still to be done. Moreover, concern for aid levels is mounting in response to the global economic downturn. In his recent book, *The Bottom Billion*, Collier (2008) states that, "The key obstacle to reforming aid is public opinion ... using aid strategically to promote growth in the bottom billion is not high on the agenda of politicians. Public opinion drives them into the "I care" photo opportunities that dominate aid." (Collier 2008: 183). Collier goes on to argue that aid agencies need to be bolder, have greater administrative capacity, and ultimately be able to take more risks and accept a higher rate of failure; but they cannot. "This is the fault of ordinary citizens who support vociferous lobbies without bothering to get informed. No aspect of domestic policy is run this badly. The aid agencies are not run by fools; they are full of intelligent people severely constrained by what public opinion permits" (Collier 2008: 184).

Collier's analysis raises an important point which is the focus of this paper: how can we reconcile the fact that upwards of 70% of individuals from donor countries support the principle of development aid—backing that that many popular domestic policy issues never enjoy—and yet, the development community and aid agencies are constrained by *what public opinion permits*? The argument suggested by Collier is that this support is fickle and / or uninformed. While the apparent public enthusiasm for supporting development assistance and for the plight of suffering distant others is heartening, we must ask, how deep does it run? In this paper we address the claim that public opinion offers a valuable tool in increasing donor countries commitment to international poverty targets. We ask is there really a link between public opinion and development aid? While it seems plausible and numerous publications cite the importance of public opinion for levels of development aid, there is little to no empirical evidence that a positive correlation exists. Second, even if the first point holds (or not) we cannot simply accept or reject this relationship since the public opinion data it is based upon is extremely shaky; we risk the old warning of garbage-in-garbage-out.

(Unravelling) The link between public opinion and development aid

The *key* assumption underlying national and international organisations commitment to monitoring public opinion is that public support for development assistance is fundamental to maintaining, and importantly, increasing current levels of aid. In policy terms, high levels of public support for development aid, can be used as both an indicator to, and leverage against, politicians who vote to allocate foreign aid against a number of competing budget issues (Council of Europe, 2001; Burnell, 1998). This assumption is not without merit; a substantial literature has demonstrated both the theoretical and empirical link between public opinion and public policy (Monroe 1998; Hill & Hinton-Andersson 1995; Stimson et al. 1995; Page and Shapiro 1983). Theoretically, citizens' political awareness, knowledge and engagement is vital to well functioning democracies (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996) as it serves to legitimise policy outcomes and ensure government responsiveness to its citizens. And empirically, Burnstein's (2003: 34) meta-analysis of the public opinion-policy linkage

literature shows that “policy is affected by opinion most of the time; often—over half the time when public opinion has any effect—the impact really matters.”

Much of the evidence, however, for a link between public opinion and policy focuses predominantly public opinion and *domestic* policy issues; the linkage between public opinion and foreign policy, has been harder to detect and is unstable (Holsti 1992; 2004). This is due in part to salience which has been shown to play a key role in opinion formation and responsiveness (Burnstein 2003) and citizens’ ability to process complex information and reveal consistent opinions (Zaller 1992). However, recent work by Aldrich et al. (2006) shows that the “public is able to develop and hold coherent attitudes on foreign policy, that citizens can and do apply their attitudes to electoral decisions, and that leads politicians to consider the electoral implications of their overseas activities” (Baum & Potter 2008: 44).

Whilst we do not seek refute either the theoretical or empirical work here, we argue that the basis for the assumed linkage between public opinion and development aid policy is faulty on three grounds. First, *issue salience* is a critical element in any link between public opinion and policy. Despite consistently high-levels of support for (the principle of) development aid, global poverty as a general category remains a low priority for most publics. Evidence of this can be seen from a recent British Elections study which asks: ‘What is the most important issue facing Britain today?’ Neither global poverty, foreign aid, or development assistance were available from the closed-ended list of response options, and when respondents were presented with a similar open-ended question fewer than 10 of the 4,789 respondents cited issues relating to global poverty. Even when compared to other foreign policy priorities, development assistance ranked 9th out of 10 policies (Stern, 1998).

Second, whilst most publics are characterised as having low-levels of political information (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), information about development aid and related policies is particularly low. Results from a recent Eurobarometer (2005) survey showed that 88% of EU citizens have never heard of the key set of policy goals relating to global poverty, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and DFID’s (2008) most recent survey of public attitudes shows that only 6% of the UK population knows anything more than very little about the MDGs. Thus, whilst survey after survey cites the low-levels of knowledge that underwrite public attitudes and development, this fact is virtually ignored in the construction of future survey instruments or indeed in analyses of public opinion. To date, we are unaware of any study the reports public support controlling for knowledge levels.

Third, and importantly, there is little evidence that demonstrates positive covariation, let alone a causal linkage, between public opinion and various measures of support for development aid, foreign aid, or concern for poverty more generally (Stern 1999). In fact, McDonnell (2001) report a negative correlation between public opinion and support for development assistance, albeit with an extremely limited data set. This last criticism undergirds our review of the surveys that follows, as such, it is important to demonstrate the dubious nature of the assumed linkage between public opinion and development aid. To this end, we provide some empirical evidence of why the assumed linkage is faulty.

As noted previously, survey after survey has demonstrated consistently high levels of public support for development aid. We create two measures of public support. The first measure includes only those questions that ask explicitly about development aid or the principle of development aid, questions we consider to have greater face validity. In the second measure, we include questions from our first measure as well as those designed to tap support or concern for poverty in developing countries. For example, the standard attitudinal measure for support for development programmes in Eurobarometer surveys asks, “In your opinion, is it very important, important, not very important, or not at all important to help poor people in countries in Africa, South America, Asia, etc. to develop”, and DFID’s primary dependent variable asks respondents how they feel about levels of

poverty in developing countries (5-pt concerned-not concerned scale). Both questions measure average public support above 70%. In the case of the first, more restrictive measure, public support for development aid or the principle of aid averages 73.6% (sd= 12.6), and the second more permissive measure, public support averages 77.2% (sd= 13.1). Figure 1 illustrates this relationship for 23 OECD countries for 1990-2007.

[Insert figure 1 here]

We elected to use the broader measure here, because it reflects both the general disparate nature of questions tapping support for aid more generally, and because it is these questions which supply policymakers with part of the evidence for an opinion-policy relationship. If policymakers are right, that there is a robust link between public opinion and development aid, we would need to find—at a minimum—positive covariation between public opinion and support for development. Of course any evidence of covariation does not imply a causal link between opinion-policy, but it is a necessary first condition. Our aid measure, Official Development Assistance (ODA) as a percentage of GNI, is calculated for each of the 23 countries from 1990-2007 and is correlated with the more and less valid measures of public support.

[Insert figure 2a/2b here]

Using our first and more valid measure of public support for development aid, we find a negative relationship ($r = -.04$, $p < .699$, $n=95$) between support and ODA (see figure 2a). Thus, contrary to the assumption of a positive relationship between support and aid, our data show a negative, non-statistically significant relationship. This finding is similar to that found by McDonnell (2001). Using our second measure which captures questions tapping support for (the principle) of development aid as well as questions of concern for poverty more generally, figure 2b shows a positive, albeit essentially flat, insignificant relationship between support and ODA ($r = .021$, $p < .81$, $n= 128$). Even when taking into account very broad questions about general support or concern for poverty, the relationship is non-evident. This leads us to question then, is there any visible relationship between public support and development aid, broadly defined. Figure 3 shows a simple plot of ODA and our second support measure. The story is less than clear. Although there appears to be some mutual movement in the early 1990s and again in the early 2000s, the interim period shows the lines moving in opposite directions. Thus, at least from the empirical data shown here, the assumed positive opinion-policy linkage is indeed a faulty one. In the next section, we analyse and critique a sample of existing surveys along three organising questions: (1) What questions do existing surveys ask?; (2) What does the data suggest?; (3) What are the problems with the existing surveys in what is being asked / what is not being asked? We then conclude by addressing the implications of our critique for future survey research and importantly, development education.

[Insert figure 3 here]

Surveying the Surveys: Recent surveys of public attitudes/opinion on poverty and development aid

Whilst both development education and monitoring of public knowledge and support for aid programmes has a long pedigree, large-scale monitoring of public attitudes is a more recent phenomenon.² Motivated by the assumed linkage between public opinion and levels of development aid, a number of government agencies and organisations have sponsored surveys designed to measure public knowledge of and support for development aid, most notably the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCED) Development Assistance Committee (DAC), and the European Union. In many cases, monitoring public attitudes comprises one part of a multi-pronged approach to poverty reduction and is an explicit commitment found in organising statements.

Table 1 provides an overview of major surveys of public attitudes since 1999. As noted above, the OECD/DAC has taken a lead in monitoring public attitudes towards development across OECD member states, and since 1995, the European and World Values Survey have conducted similar large N cross-national studies. These surveys provide aggregate overviews of donor country attitudes toward development, and they are complemented by numerous within-country surveys in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, United States, and elsewhere. We present the existing surveys in the table below.

[Insert table 1 here]

The sizeable population of existing surveys exhibit significant variation in question wording, length, number of observations, and sampling procedures. Collectively however, the surveys demonstrate a remarkable degree of consistency in their findings. As such this review is highly selective, yet representative. Our general summary of surveys draws on four unique surveys, two of which are conducted annually or in multiple-year waves, yielding a total of n=7 surveys from which we explicate the general findings: (a) World Opinion on Addressing Hunger and Poverty (PIPA 2008); (b) Public Attitudes towards Development (UK Department for International Development 2008, 2005); (c) Europeans and Development Aid (European Commission Eurobarometer 2007, 2005, 1999); and (d) Americans on Foreign Aid and World Hunger (PIPA 2001).

The choice of surveys reflect two dominant approaches to monitoring public attitudes, multi-state/pooled cross-sections (e.g. OECD/DAC, Eurobarometer) and within-state (e.g. UK (DFID), US-AID) sponsored studies of public opinion and development aid. Our sample here gives primacy to surveys sponsored by donor countries rather than recipient countries as we are fundamentally interested in unpacking the assumption that public support for development aid is necessary for maintaining/increasing levels of development aid. The review proceeds in two parts, first providing a general summary of findings, followed by a critique addressing substantive and measurement issues for four categories of interest: (1) the validity of measures of public support for development assistance; (2) knowledge and awareness of development; (3) perceptions of effectiveness and corruption, and (4) motivations of support for development aid and concern for poverty.

1. Public opinion and support for development aid

Support for development assistance is remarkable in terms of its consistency both over time and across different sample populations. Levels of support tend to lie within the 70-90% band. This consistency is all the more remarkable given inconsistencies between the surveys. As one would expect the questions' precise form differs with substantial variations in wording across different surveys. But more significantly the substance of the question also varies substantially across the different surveys. In the UK, DFID has consistently asked respondents how they felt about poverty in developing countries: "Q1 Which item on this screen best describes how you feel about levels of poverty in poor countries?" The response options are: very concerned, fairly concerned, no strong feelings either one way or the other, not very concerned, not at all concerned (DFID 2008: 67). This then tends to be reported as an indicator of support for poverty reduction efforts, e.g. in 2008 22% of the UK public say they are 'very concerned' about levels of poverty in poor countries and overall levels of concern remain steady at 74% (DFID 2008).

In the US respondents were asked if they agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, disagree strongly (or don't know) with the following statement: "The United States should be willing to share at least a small portion of its wealth with those in the world who are in great need." (PIPA 2001). US respondents displayed a comparable level of support to the UK with 79% agreeing with the statement.³ The EU's Eurobarometer (2005) asks a similar question: "In your opinion, is it very important, fairly important, not very important or not at all important to help people in poor

countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia, etc. to develop?” The response options being: very important, fairly important, not very important, not at all important, or don’t know. Support across the EU appears slightly higher than in the US with 91% saying it was either very (53%) or fairly (38%) important (Eurobarometer 2005).⁴

Yet, this – support for aid or help in principle – is obviously quite different from concern about levels of poverty in poor countries. And support in principle or in the abstract is very different from questions about the appropriate level of support in terms of budgets. Eurobarometer (1999 Q45a) asks: “Do you think the aid provided by the government should increase a lot, increase a little, decrease a little or decrease a lot?” The majority of EU citizens at 51.1% believe that their national government should increase (a little or a lot) their provision of aid. This varies between 35.9% in Belgium and 79% in Spain. By socio-demographic breakdown supporters of an increase tend to be educated beyond twenty years old and more wealthy. Those who feel aid should decrease tend to be older men, lower education levels, and manual workers and / or in the two lower income brackets. On average 58.5% wanted to see the contribution of the European Commission (Q45b) increase. In the UK, DFID has now begun to supplement the question about concern with one which asks whether people agree with the Government’s commitment to increase spending on overseas aid to poor countries, in order to meet the MDGs (DFID 2008: Q13). Under half (46%) agreed, with 26% neither agreeing or disagreeing and 16% strongly disagreeing (DFID 2008: 34). In the US respondents were asked “Do you feel the amount the US spends on foreign aid is too much, too little, or about right?” (PIPA 2001 Q5). Now 61% of respondents answered that the US spends too much, with 26% saying about right.⁵ This is the same sample population in which 79% agreed that the US should be willing to share at least a small portion of its wealth with those in the world who are in great need.

These types of questions that tap respondents’ feelings towards how much the government does or should spend are clearly important, but they also bracket off the question of whether respondents have accurate or even a reasonable sense of how much *is* spent on foreign aid.⁶ Hence, asking respondents whether they would be willing to support development assistance that amounts to a certain monetary value is more specific again. For instance, the World Bank (2002) has estimated that it will require an extra US\$39-54 billion per year to meet MDG1. In a 2008 survey, titled *World Opinion on Addressing Hunger and Poverty*, WorldPublicOpinion.org asked citizens of some of the OECD countries whether they would be willing to pay the estimated per person amount to meet the MDG1 goal of cutting poverty and hunger in half by 2015. The amount that the World Bank has estimated was divided between the OECD donor countries, adjusted for income, and then the cost per person was calculated. The per person cost of meeting MDG1 came to £25 for the UK, \$56 for the US, 27 Euros for Germany and so on.⁷ On average 77% are in favour of contributing towards meeting the goal (provided that all others do too). The country-specific results and original question are displayed in the figure 3 below.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

In summary, we note that there is an important variation in the ways in which surveys capture and report support for development. These can be categorised as follows, ranging from less to more valid measures of the explicit policy choice, development assistance:

- Concern about levels of poverty in poor countries
- Support for aid in principle
- Support for current levels or marginal increases in aid expenditure / budget
- Willingness to pay costed development targets

The important points here are (1) that different results are gained by being more concrete and providing respondents with accurate information, and (2) that some survey questions

problematically conflate concern for poverty or other vague notion of supporting aid in principle with actual support for funding development assistance. This leads to some unsustainable claims. For example, the conclusions of the Eurobarometer (2007: 33) state that: “The survey shows that there is broad public support across the EU for development policy which helps poorer countries.” Yet QC1 asks nothing at all about support or even concern. It is instead about motivations: “What in your opinion are the two main motivations for richer countries to provide development aid to poor countries?”

Critique

Our primary critique of existing surveys is that they are of poor face validity. This results, in part, from researchers being unclear on what it is they want to measure in the first place and then generate survey instruments that best approximate such attitudes. What is it that we need to measure if we want to improve our understanding of public support? Is the dependent variable public support for development aid (properly understood), or should we be broader in our definition and ask about foreign aid or indeed the principle of aid? Whilst a case can be made for any one of these measures, the field would benefit from an agreed measure of public support—for what in particular? Not only would this facilitate cross-state comparisons, but it would serve to harmonise scholars’ approach to understanding public support more accurately. To illustrate, the most commonly asked question is whether respondents support the ‘principle of providing aid to developing countries’ (OECD DAC). From this two conclusions are repeatedly drawn: first, there is no empirical evidence for “aid fatigue”, and second, there are high-levels of support for development assistance. Not only do we recognise these two as different concepts, from the principle of aid, we argue this is an important distinction. Czaplínska (2007: 7) notes, questions that ask about helping poor people and support for development aid are not equivalent. First, and simply in terms of measurement error, respondents may feel compelled to reply in the affirmative to the principle of aid as a socially desirable response, but second, the principle of the matter is very different than the actuality, particularly when an issue suffers from low saliency, low-levels of knowledge and high-levels of scepticism about the efficiency of aid programmes.

Furthermore policymakers have assumed that high levels of support, readily translate into political support, e.g. that respondents are willing—by virtue of registering high degree of support or concern—to vote or otherwise register such preferences with relevant political officials. Whilst absolute support for development aid is consistently above 70% for OECD/DAC countries on aggregate, such support does not translate politically due to lack of saliency amongst competing policy issues. In measuring relative support, respondents are asked to make reasoned trade-offs between competing policy issues. For example, when a PIPA (2001) survey asked respondents to register their priorities, foreign aid is seen as less important than domestic concerns. An overwhelming 84% agreed with the assertion that ‘taking care of problems at home is more important than giving aid to foreign countries.’ (PIPA 2001: 9). Thus, assuming there is finite space for public attentiveness to a large and competing number of policy issues and finite resources, surveys must take into account the relative priority of development aid against competing objectives. This may be particularly important during times of general and sustained economic malaise.

Recently there has been improvement in measure relative vs. absolute support for development aid. As part of their major revamp of the annual survey of public attitudes, DFID has now begun asking question that provide relative measures of the saliency of development aid vis-à-vis other competing policy issues. For example, “Tackling poverty in poor countries is less important than other problems in the world today” and “I would be happy to pay more tax if the extra money was used to help tackle poverty in poor countries.” These questions allow respondents to rank development aid along side other issues and weigh the costs and benefits of competing policy choices, providing researchers and indeed policymakers a more robust indication of relative saliency and priorities. And whilst

neither question explicitly asked respondents which competing policy objective they would be most willing to forgo for increased spending on aid, they do go some way to measuring relative support.

Valid survey measures ultimately rest upon correctly operationalising concepts in the survey instrument and the minimisation of measurement error. However, many surveys fail to properly define concepts or provide contextual information to respondents, which is particularly important for content where knowledge-levels are expected to be low. For example, a US-AID (2003) survey examined US respondents' attitudes and knowledge of development assistance, however throughout the survey the terms foreign aid, aid to foreign countries, economic aid, and foreign policy programme were used without proper definition, contextualisation, or separation. More appropriately, a recent Eurobarometer (2007, QC1) survey defines terms for respondents in noting: "Development aid means giving grants or loans to developing countries which aim to promote economic development and human welfare. We are not talking here about humanitarian aid (that is assistance provided in emergency situations like war, natural disaster, famine, etc.), but about development aid." We recognise the distinction between foreign aid, which includes military spending, and development aid/assistance as an important one.

Indeed, we (and respondents) may define development assistance even more widely. Is it foreign aid in general (i.e. ODA and Other Official Flows)? Can it be as wide as to include trade reform and addressing the role of subsidies? Does it include military spending on peacekeeping operations? And what about liberal immigration policies? It is clear that respondents do not have a narrow notion of development assistance, e.g. Eurobarometer 2005, QC4: "Here is a list of possible actions which our Government could undertake to help developing countries achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Please tell me, which of these actions is, in your opinion, the most important, the second most important and the third most important." Reduce the possibility of armed conflict and war is mentioned 65% of the time (Eurobarometer 2005: 20) and stands out as the top ranked priority 32% of the time with debt cancellation (15%) and providing technical training (14%) some way behind. Increasing development aid was 4th top ranked chosen 12% of the time and was in respondents' top three 41% of the time. What does this tell us about how the public views development aid / development assistance / cooperation / interventions? Quite clearly, war and conflict and corruption top the explanations of poverty (DFID 2008: 42-43).⁸

Research has also shown that development aid/assistance can be interpreted by respondents as at least three quite different things⁹, namely "1) attitudes toward humanitarian aid, 2) attitudes toward ODA in relation to other government expenditures, and 3) views to the effectiveness of different ODA activities" (Boas 2002: 2). McDonnell (2003) claims "public opinion doesn't not even see 'helping poor people' as 'development' because they conceive aid as short term charity for humanitarian relief" (in McDonnell 2006, 5). She tests and finds support for the hypothesis that public opinion has an impact on decisions on aid, only if 'aid' is specified and restricted to mean emergency aid. Evidence from the UK has found that the public tends to associate the UK Government's involvement in development as being disaster relief (42%) (DFID 2008: Q6).

This ties closely with whom respondents see as the effective and active development actors. DFID (2005) asks whether the following organisations make a major, some, or little or no contribution to reducing poverty in developing countries: the United Nations (UN), IMF, World Bank, individual governments of the richer countries (e.g. US, Europe, Australia, Japan), EU, governments of the developing countries, international charities (e.g. Red Cross, Oxfam, Save the Children), business, WTO. Combining the response options "major contribution" and "some contribution" you get the largest contribution from international charities 93%, the UN next at 80%, and the governments of rich countries at 75%. So it is not even clear that respondents are expressing opinions about the role and activities of governments, IOs or international development charities.

2. Knowledge

There are generally two approaches to measuring knowledge of development assistance, first asking how much of the national budget individual states allocate to foreign aid, and as of 2000, knowledge of the Millennium Development Goals. With regard to the former, very little is known about the percentage of national budgets earmarked for foreign aid by respondents across countries, but Americans are particularly ignorant on the issue. In the US respondents were asked two questions, what proportion of the budget they thought went to foreign aid and what they thought “an appropriate percentage of the federal budget to go to foreign aid, if any?” (PIPA 2001). The results are very interesting. On average, Americans thought just under a quarter of the US budget was directed to foreign aid (median 20%) and thought 13.8% was the appropriate amount (median 10%). The actual answer is roughly 1% of the US federal budget is spent on foreign aid. Respondents were then asked “imagine that you found out that the US spends 1% of the federal budget on foreign aid. Would you feel that this is too little, too much or about right?” (PIPA 2001: Q10). The responses were: 37% said too little, 44% said it was about right, and 13% thought that this was too much.¹⁰ By way of comparison, to the EU, we find a higher percentage of Europeans (24%) are able to accurately estimate that 1-4% of the national budget is allocated as aid to developing countries (Eurobarometer 2005).

A second approach to measuring knowledge is to ask respondents about their knowledge of the Millennium Development Goals, representing the focus of government and NGO activity and spending in the last decade. For example, despite the centrality of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the UN, IOs, and national governments in coordinating and focussing development activities, plus a considerable UN campaign on the MDGs, knowledge of the MDGs is poor. In 2005 – arguably *the* year for media coverage and public awareness about international development issues – a massive 88% of EU citizens had no knowledge of the MDGs; by 2007 this had improved slightly to 80% (Eurobarometer 2005: 4; 2007: 13ff). This level of unawareness is confirmed in DFID’s survey where 74% of the UK public had never heard of the MDGs, and while a further 6% had heard of the MDGs they were not able to articulate what the MDGs stood for or were about (DFID 2008). So, as the Eurobarometer (2007: 33) concludes that while there appears to be “strong public support for a poverty-focused, Africa-based development policy,” the low levels of awareness about development policy and the MDGs is a “stark message.” More generally however, respondents felt that they knew something about the lives of people in living in poor countries, 58% feel they know ‘a great deal’ (6%) or a ‘a fair amount’ (52%), and this was highest for active enthusiasts (79%), interested mainstreamers (69%), and family first sympathisers (52%).

Critique

As demonstrated above, surveys of public opinion and development are characterised by pervasive and persistently low-levels of knowledge. Whilst undesirable in light of considerations of democratic competence and government responsiveness, our criticism of low-levels of knowledge are targeted not towards citizens of donor countries, but to researchers who fail to report findings controlling for knowledge and indeed interest levels. It is crucial that knowledge questions are integrated into both survey questions and design *and* into the analysis of responses; respondent knowledge questions are fundamental to evaluating the robustness of public support. If, as demonstrated above, American respondents think nearly a quarter of the US budget is allocated to foreign aid and they are opposed to increasing current levels of aid, we ought to consider and report such attitudes according. Equally important, if the average American thinks a quarter of the US budget is allocated to foreign aid, thinks it too high, and simultaneously supports the principle of development aid we ought to consider and report such findings with some caution. Public attitudes toward development aid should be reported controlling for respondent knowledge levels. A second, but related criticism here is that Gilens (2001) has shown that ignorance of policy specific information leads citizens to hold views different than they might otherwise. In short, policy specific information may yield different preferences than general political knowledge, thus, it is not enough to be interested or informed

about politics generally, one must be able to engage with policy specific knowledge in order to express genuine attitudes and preferences.

Finally, reporting public attitudes towards development aid should not exist in isolation from measures of general attitudinal structures. In other words, "Polls rarely deliver information on underlying attitudes and values and on preferable directions of aid. In addition, polls usually neglect people's approach to policy issues going beyond aid, for instance trade, debt and immigration policy (Czaplińska 2007: 14). Here, support for development aid may covary with attitudes on domestic welfare redistribution (Noel & Therein 2002), position on a left-right ideological scale, perceptions of government efficiency, or trust in political institutions. On the latter, a recent DFID survey (2008) poses a general question on respondents' trust in government to act in the country's best interest. Knowing something about respondents wider attitudinal structures may provide a more robust interpretation to support for development aid or the motivations for support for development aid, a point we take up below.

3. Perceptions of aid effectiveness

The public's view of corruption is probably the greatest perceived challenge for development agencies. In the UK, for instance, 47% of respondents thought that aid was wasted with 73% attributing this to corruption and 50% agreeing that it was due to poor management and / or delivery (DFID 2008: 44). In the US respondents were asked: "Please tell me your best guess. What percentage of US aid money that goes to poor countries ends up helping the people who really need it?" (PIPA 2001: Q26). The mean response was 23.1% (median 10%). When US respondents were asked: "Please tell me your best guess. What percentage of US aid money that goes to poor countries ends up in the pockets of corrupt government officials there?" (PIPA 2001: Q51) the mean answer was 53.8% and the median exactly 50%. When the respondents in the UK were asked about how individuals could most effectively contribute to development almost twice as many chose charitable donations than chose paying taxes. The Eurobarometer also collects information on whether respondents feel their national government is taking effective action to help poor people in the developing world and whether respondents feel that the aid provided by their governments improves the lives of poor people.¹¹ The evidence here is less concerning. The majority of respondents in the EU agreed that their government was effective (62% yes) and around a quarter disagreed (26%) (Eurobarometer 2005).¹² Whereas only about a half (51%) agreed that development improved people's lives with a third disagreeing (32%). However, despite some good news, the findings overwhelmingly suggest public perception of effectiveness is poor.

Critique

All the evidence suggests that support for development assistance is highly contingent on perceptions of effectiveness, especially corruption. Though problems of corruption appear to be reasonably well surveyed they are not analysed systematically. In Eurobarometer 1999 there is an interesting but limited follow-up question (Q42b) to Q42a: "In your opinion, it is very important, important, not very important, or not at all important to help people in poor countries in Africa, South America, Asia etc to develop". This may grant the survey a bit more validity in that those who answered that development aid was not important were asked why (10 options). The number one response was that "First, we should solve problems (poverty, unemployment, economy) in 'our country'" (76.3% on average across the EU15 with a high of 90% in France) followed by "The money will be misused and will not reach those who need it" (45.2% and tends to be higher in the Scandinavian countries) and "Poor countries should stop fighting and stop buying arms" (Eurobarometer 1999: 6). Denmark scored especially highly on the responses that there will always be rich and poor countries and that development aid is a waste of money. The survey also provides a breakdown according to socio-demographic variables.

Secondly, knowledge and optimism are too tangled together in questions about, say, a respondent's confidence of the MDGs being reached. For example, where DFID (2005) asked respondents whether they thought that the world's governments would have made no, some or significant progress or have achieved the individual MDGs by the year 2015; only 3% thought that MDG1 would be achieved by 2015. Eurobarometer (2005: QC3) asked a similar question to DFID, but asking whether or not they thought it likely that the goal is met. For MDG1 29% say definitely (5%) or probably (24%), 43% say probably not and 25% say definitely not. This varies massively by country, with France least confident (14%) that MDG1 will be achieved and Cyprus most confident (at 52%) with an even range in between.¹³ But what does this tell us about anything? It problematically conflates, for example, respondents' knowledge levels about progress on the MDGs and their optimism. MDG1 will probably be achieved at a global level – because of China and India, so what does this tell us? This question could capture a lot of different things: a natural optimism or pessimism, a lack of knowledge about the MDGs or a lot of knowledge about them. These things could conceivably be pulling in different directions but hidden in the final answer. This again underlines the importance of controlling for knowledge levels etc.

4. Motivations for support and attitudinal structures

The final category of results relates to motivations for support. Traditionally academic studies – of governments and individuals – have tended to divide motivations into self-interested ones and other-regarding ones, such as morality. In terms of self-interest the common logics identified revolve around the positive consequences of development assistance for risky global interdependencies which are considered to have negative externalities such as drugs, trade, immigration unemployment etc. (Eurobarometer 1999: 41ff).¹⁴ Indeed, the Eurobarometer (2007: 33) survey concludes that “The largest segment of EU citizens think that the two main motivations for providing development aid are self-interest, the awareness that investing in development is investing in their own future, in terms of giving aid to countries in order to increase trade with them and contributing to global stability.”¹⁵ Likewise, 64.4% of US citizens are convinced of the statement: “Because the world is so interconnected today reducing hunger in the world ultimately serves US interests. It creates more political stability and by promoting economic growth helps to create more markets for US exports” (PIP 2001). And 65% of US citizens think we should help Africa because it has the potential to become a big market for US goods (PIPA 2001)

Meanwhile, the 2008 WorldPublicOpinion poll on *World Opinion on Addressing Hunger and Poverty* asks respondents “Do you think the developed countries do or do not have a moral responsibility to work to reduce hunger and severe poverty in poor countries?” On average 81% say developed countries do have a moral responsibility to work towards reducing hunger and severe poverty. The country by country results are shown in the table below.

[Insert table 2 here]

Surveys do tend to recognise the distinction between instrumental and normative motivations and ask questions to tap into the distinction, even if indirectly. For example, DFID (2005) asked respondents to what extent they agreed with the statement that “poverty in developing countries is a moral issue.” The survey later asks if respondents feel that poverty in developing countries could have consequences that affect them personally and in a separate question consequences that damage the interests of the UK. What is less well done is attempting to parse out the impact of different motivations on attitudinal structures. It is entirely plausible and logical that people are able to hold a normative and consequentialist view for supporting development assistance. Part of the problem here is that the survey instruments are not sufficiently focussed to get meaningful data about what motivates respondents' attitudes.

Critique

Whilst there is a substantial literature on the determinants of state motivations in giving aid, the determinants of individual-level motivations is significantly under-researched. Chong & Gradstein (2006) using the World Values Survey found that satisfaction with own government performance and individual relative income are positively related to willingness to provide aid. Harper et al. (1990) find that respondents' perceptions of poverty (as measured by an 18-item Causes of Third World Poverty Questionnaire (CTWPQ)) were correlated (but multi-factorial) with their disposition to believe in a just world.¹⁶ Specifically, that those who believed in a just world also tended to 'blame the poor' for their poverty. Harper and Manasse (1992) show that low JW believers tended to blame poverty on exploitation, war, and economic systems. One potentially crucial driver of motivations is religiosity. Whilst this variable has just begun to get some attention in recent studies (Chong & Gradstein 2006), Paxton & Knack (2008) found no correlation with expressing religiosity, but did find a significant relationship with how often a person actually attends a place of worship.

Paxton & Knack's study uses survey data from both the World Values Study (1995) and Gallup (2002) and examine determinants of public opinion in donor countries. Among other things, they find that those respondents who see themselves as members of the world, are satisfied with their financial situation, women and trust in people and institutions are more likely to support aid. Finally, using survey data from DFID's 2005 public attitudes survey van Heerde & Hudson (2009) examine individual-level motivations for concern for poverty using a broad self-interest vs. moral judgment framework. They estimate individual concern for poverty as a function of moral judgements, self-interest, awareness of poverty, and assessments of achieving Millennium Development Goals, controlling for a host of demographic variables. Their analysis suggests that moral attitudes are positively related to concern, whereas self-interested attitudes are negatively related to concern for poverty however, respondents appear to have a significantly different calculus in thinking about poverty in developing countries in terms of demarcating poverty as an issue that has personal consequences, and poverty as an issue that has consequences more widely distributed. Respondents are more likely to be concerned about poverty when they feel poverty affects them personally whereas where poverty is deemed to affect the UK, respondents are less likely to be concerned. Beyond these recent studies however, much more needs to be done by way of examining individual-level motivations for support. Moving beyond the (enlightened) self-interest vs. moral judgments framework, there is reason to explore and demarcate self-interest as direct benefits, view of the world as a zero sum game or enlightened self-interest (indirect benefits, positive sum game) in addition to altruism (satisfaction gained by others' utility (i.e. their utility is included in your preference set), justice, cosmopolitanism (transnational identity or as global citizens), religious beliefs, humanitarian or moral sympathies, emotional responses, etc. One note of caution is well expressed by Harper and Manasse (1992: 784) "individuals and governments instead have recourse to apparently contradictory explanations for poverty (e.g., blaming the poor and blaming society) that are used at different times to serve particular rhetorical functions." The challenge will be to construct a survey instrument capable of teasing out consistent attitudes or turning to alternative methods of gathering data.

Conclusions: Getting the most out of surveys of public opinion

Donor countries have allocated substantial sums of bi/multilateral aid to developing countries, and consequently, both academic and policy communities have rightly devoted a significant amount of attention to evaluating the effectiveness of aid. In an effort to maintain and ultimately increase aid levels in light of significant criticism of aid programmes and fluctuating economic conditions, international development communities along with domestic agencies in donor countries have taken every opportunity to point out consistently high-levels of public support for development assistance.

Along with several international organisations, donor countries have set out—as a clear priority—the need to monitor public opinion and development aid. Whilst expenditures to measure public attitudes/opinion and development aid pale in comparison to aggregate sums of ODA, the

development community has routinely cited the fundamental role of public support in (increasing) levels of aid. However, the validity and reliability of surveys of public opinion and development have received little scrutiny. Smillie's oft cited characterisation of public support for development as 'a mile wide and an inch deep' also applies to the quality of surveys of public attitudes. In this paper, we have sought to illustrate key deficiencies.

There is, as we have noted, a wealth of data on public attitudes towards development, motivated in large part, by an assumed (causal) positive linkage between support and development aid levels. Our evidence has shown that this assumption, whilst theoretically valid, does not have empirical support. More research needs to be done on the causal pathways of the public policy process examining how public opinion feeds into interests of elite actors. The emphasis has thus far been on gauging public opinion, not on elite opinion. We need to do this to understand the causal links between public opinion and policy decisions. Second, despite this wealth of information on public attitudes and opinion on development aid we note there are serious questions about the validity of these surveys. Future survey instruments must do better in providing contextual information to respondents, consistent questions on the dependent variable, and measure of relative vs. absolute support for development aid programmes. Better measures of support should also be weighted by knowledge, perceptions, and broader measures of attitudinal structures as these variables clearly affect attitudes. In addition, much of the data is under-utilised, and limited to descriptive analyses. Future work needs to engage both with the theoretical literature on opinion-policy linkages and efforts to model such relationships statistically.

Finally, future research must direct attention to a more nuanced understanding of the determinants of individual-level support, moving beyond self-interest vs. moral frameworks, not the least so that we can better understand whether strength of support co-varies with different types of motivations, i.e. is assisting the global poor framed as an issue of self-interest, humanitarian or moral sympathies or justice? Although some surveys do try and tap the distinction between self-interest and moral motivations, these are currently very poorly measured and understood. This can be achieved through more precise survey instruments and through complementary qualitative research. This last point is very relevant. Qualitative data is neither used comparatively nor is there any attempt to reconcile these different data sources with quantitative survey results. Hence, a truly mixed method approach would seek to integrate qualitative research into, for example, the original construction of the survey as well as its interpretation. Surveys could also be supplemented with some experimental and social psychology work in order to further unpack motivations and attitudes.

In understanding what motivates individual-level support for aid, policymakers and the development community are better able to communicate with the public. Moreover, knowledge of individual motivations for support will inform the development community's strategy in accommodating existing preferences or whether they should aim to actively shape preferences. The answer to this will depend upon what the true goal of a communication and public awareness strategy is. Is the goal to maximise support for poverty alleviation or poverty alleviation itself?

Tables and Figures

Figure 1. Average levels of public support for (the principle of) development aid, 1990-2007

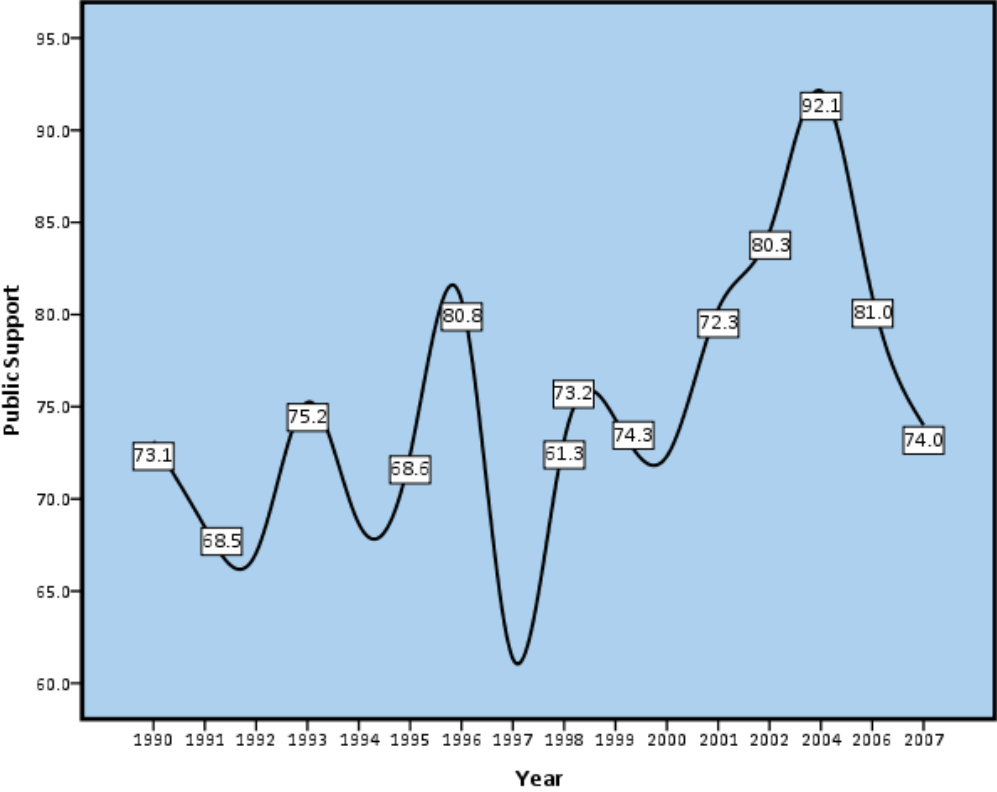


Figure 2a. Correlation of Public Support for the (principle of) Development Aid and ODA, 1990-2007
OECD Countries

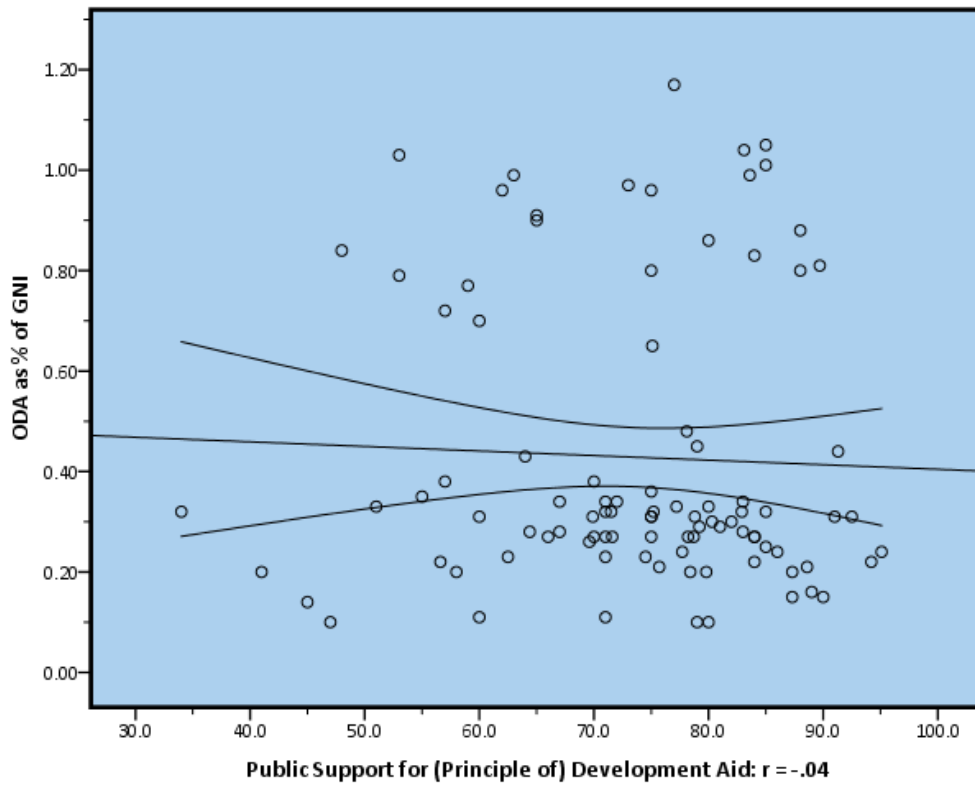


Figure 2b. Correlation of Public Support Development Aid/Concern for Poverty and ODA, 1990-2007
OECD Countries

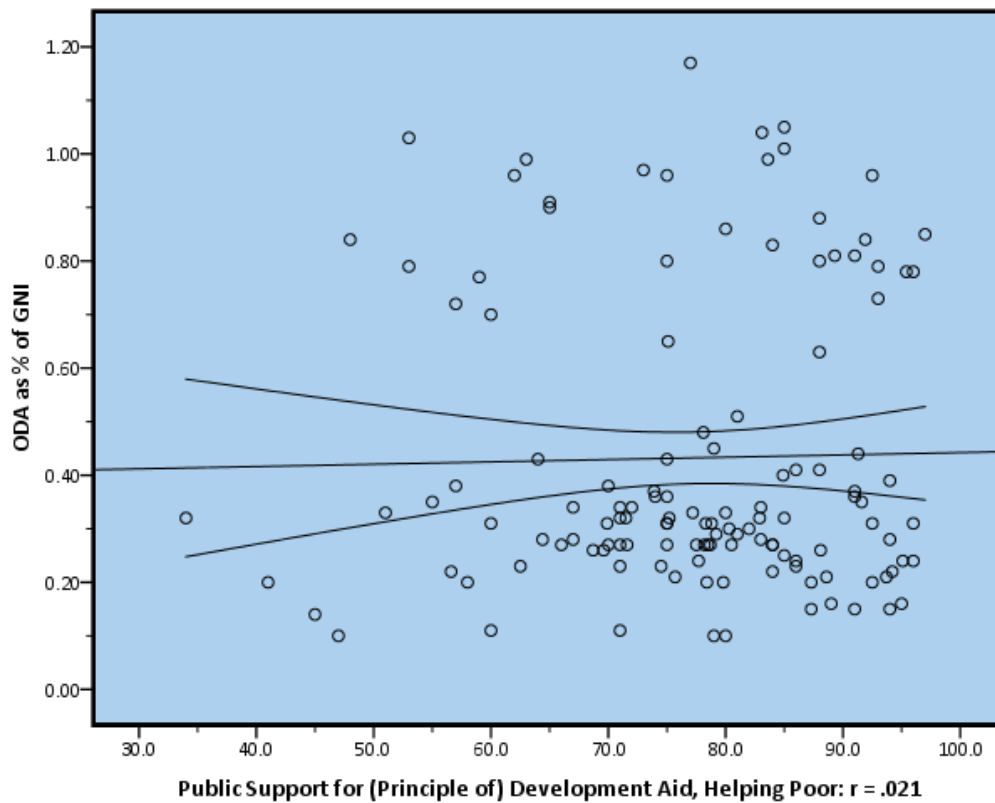
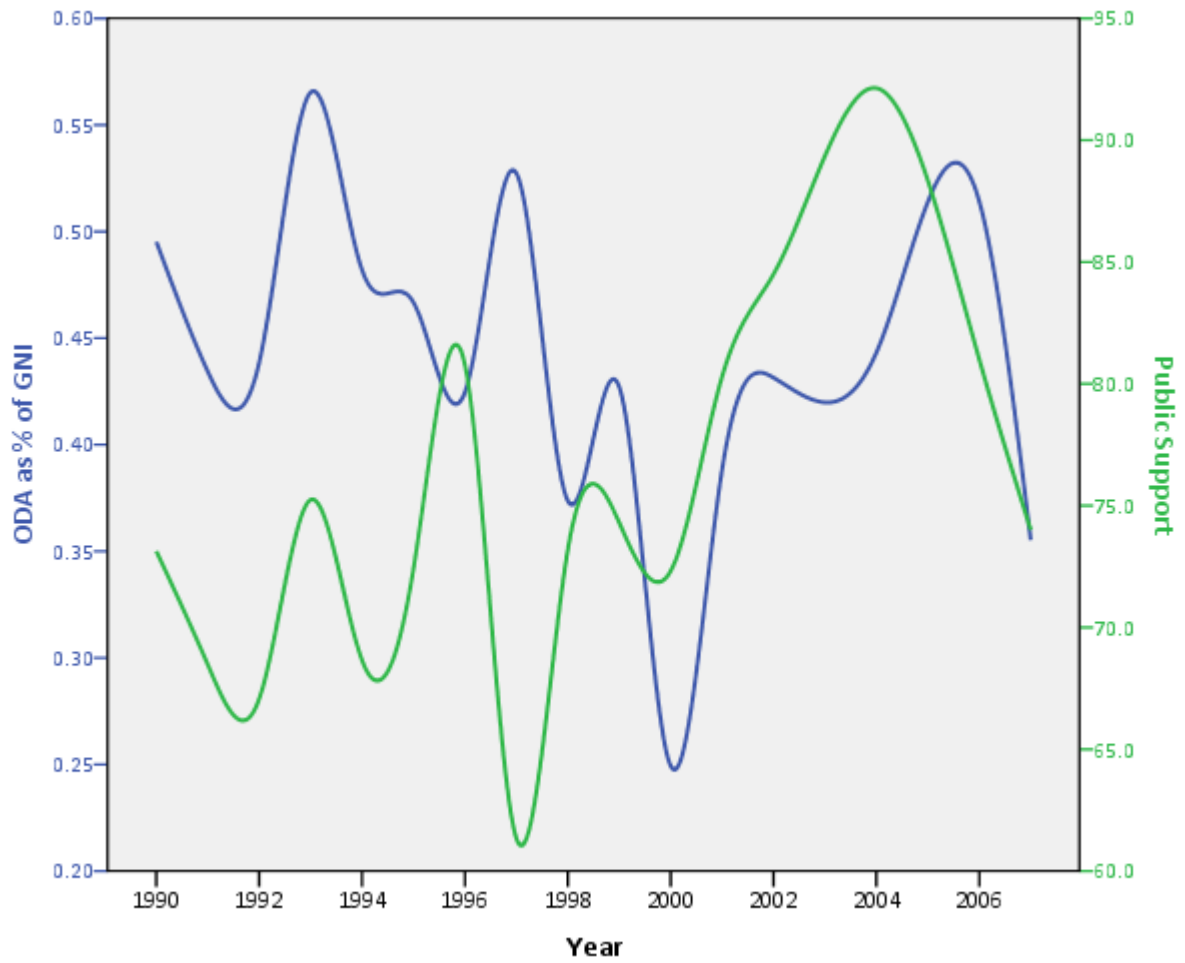


Figure 3. Public Support for Development Aid/Concern for Poverty and ODA as % of GNI, 1990-2007
OECD Countries



Sources: Data is collated from DFID, (2008, 2007, 2005) Public attitudes towards development, available at www.dfid.gov.uk; Eurobarometer 222 (62.2); Eurobarometer 184 (58.2); Eurobarometer 126 (50.1); McDonnell et al. 2003; Mc Donnell 2001.

Table 1. Ten Years of Surveys of Public Attitudes and Opinion on Poverty and Development Aid, 1998-2008

Year(s)	Commissioner	Title	Unit(s)/Sample size/House/Type
2008	Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA)	World Opinion on Addressing Hunger and Poverty	20 countries (n=16,370); Pooled cross-section
2008	Action Aid	Where are the Public?	United Kingdom; Cross-section
2008-1999 ¹	Department for International Development (DFID)	Public Attitudes towards Development	United Kingdom (08 n=2,056) (05 n=1,248); TNS (07-08); Office of National Statistics (99-05); Cross-section
2007	Action Aid	Public Attitudes to Aid	United Kingdom; Cross-section
2007 ²	European Commission: Eurobarometer (286)	Citizens of the New EU Member States and Development Aid	New EU Member States (n= c. 11,000); TNS Opinion and Social; Cross-section
2007	European Commission: Eurobarometer (280)	Europeans and Development Aid	27 EU Member States (n=26,755); Cross-section; TNS Opinion and Social
2007-2004	Department for International Development/COI	The UK Public's Perspective on Global Poverty	United Kingdom; 6 Waves Andrew Darnton;
2007-2004	The German Marshall Fund of the United States	Perspectives on Trade and Poverty Reduction	7 countries
2006	European Commission: Eurobarometer (268)	Humanitarian Aid	EU Member States; Romania, Bulgaria (n= 26,853) ; TNS Opinion and Social; Cross-section
2006	European Values Study Foundation/ World Values Survey	World Values Survey Omnibus	
2006-2002	Gallup International	The Voice of the People	68 countries (n=53,749)
2005	European Commission: Eurobarometer (222 EB62.2)	Europeans and Development Aid	25 EU Member States (n=24,999); Cross-section
2005	Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA)/Knowledge Networks	Americans on Addressing World Poverty	United States
2005, 2000 1995, 1990	World Values Survey Association	World Values Survey Omnibus	
2003	Development Studies Centre/OECD	Public Opinion and the Fight Against Poverty	OECD/DAC countries (n= various); Cross-section

2002	European Commission: Eurobarometer (184 EB58.2)	Europeans and Development Aid	15 EU Member States; TNS Opinion and Social
2001	Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA)	Americans on Foreign Aid and World Hunger: A Study of US Public Attitudes	United States; Cross-section (n=901); Communications Center
2000/1999; 1996/1995	European Values Survey	European Values Foundation	33 countries (n=41,125); Pooled cross-section
1999	European Commission: Eurobarometer (EB 50.1)	Europeans and Development Aid	15 EU Member States (n=16,214); DGX: Public Opinion Analysis Unit; Pooled cross-section
1999	Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA)	See 01 PIPA	

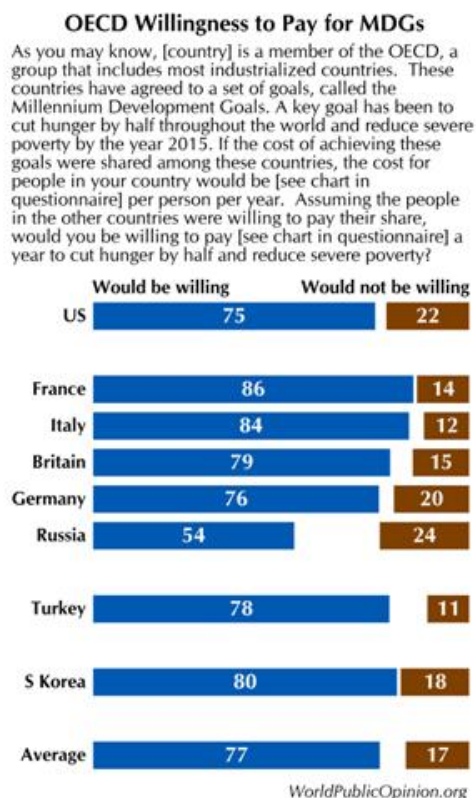
(Source: Compiled by authors; see OECD Development Centre http://www.oecd.org/document/6/0,3343,en_2649_34101_39295366_1_1_1_1,00.html for representative list of surveys. ¹2005 and 2008 reviewed here; ²The European Commission conducts a number of waves, however we separate them out here as the enlargement of EU membership results in different countries sampled).

Table 2. “Do you think the developed countries do or do not have a moral responsibility to work to reduce hunger and severe poverty in poor countries?”

	Do	Do not	DK / NS
Argentina	85	10	5
Mexico	90	8	1
US	81	17	2
France	79	19	2
Germany	87	12	1
Britain	81	14	5
Italy	89	10	2
Russia	54	29	17
Ukraine	87	6	7
Egypt	71	27	3
Jordan	81	11	8
Palestinian Ter.	50	49	1
Turkey	81	15	4
Kenya	92	8	1
Nigeria	87	12	1
China	83	5	12
India	72	14	13
Indonesia	87	4	8
S Korea	90	10	1
Taiwan	91	5	4
Average	81 %	14%	5%

Source: WorldPublicOpinion.org (2008) World Opinion on Addressing Hunger and Poverty; percentage in columns.

Figure 4: Willingness to pay for meeting MDG1



Appendix

Table A: Per person cost of meeting MDG1

	Amount in \$USD	Amount in Respondent's Currency
France	\$45	29 EUROS
Italy	\$39	25 EUROS
Great Britain	\$49	25 POUNDS
South Korea	\$23	24,000 WON
Turkey	\$10	12 LIRAS
US	\$56	\$56
Germany	\$43	27 EUROS
Russia	\$11	257 RUBLES

Source: WorldPublicOpinion.org (2008) World Opinion on Addressing Hunger and Poverty

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Notes

¹ As expressed to the authors in personal discussions with the Bank's staff.

² As early as 1983 the DAC was sponsoring meetings on "Public Opinion and Development Assistance," and in 1994 the OECD Development Centre and the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) sponsored a meeting of policymakers, academics, parliamentarians and journalists to consult on "Public Knowledge and Public Attitudes to International Development Co-operation." Two collaborative working groups, "Public Opinion Polling" (POP 2002-03) and "POP Plus" (2003-04), are state-run organizations aimed at improving the quality and consistency of survey measures and are coordinated by the OECD DAC.

³ Agree strongly 34.8%, agree somewhat 44.1%, disagree somewhat 11.8%, disagree strongly 8.9%, don't know 0.3% (PIPA 2001).

⁴ Some countries – such as Sweden and Cyprus (73%) – have very high very important responses and it was usually the new Member States that were at the bottom (Estonia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Slovakia) that were less likely to say very (Eurobarometer 2005: 26). Socio-demographic cross-analysis shows that education past 20 years, or being a student boosts importance, as does being on the left of the political spectrum (Eurobarometer 2005: 27). Also, those who have a positive perception of the impact of aid (Eurobarometer 2005: QC5) are more likely to say that aid is very important (Eurobarometer 2005: 27).

⁵ Too much 61.47%, too little 6.8%, about right 25.8%, don't know 5.6%, refused 0.4% (PIPA 2001).

⁶ The issue of factual knowledge is addressed in the next section below and the US survey does gather data on this which is illuminating.

⁷ See table A in appendix.

⁸ DFID (2005) asked respondents to rank the ways in which the UK Government should be contributing to reducing poverty. The most important answer was by ending conflict and war (28%), this was followed by providing financial support and other types of aid such as training and/or expertise (27%), working to cancel the debts owed by developing countries (18%), and working for a fairer world trading system (18%).

⁹ See also Smillie 1996.

¹⁰ The exact figures being, too little 37.4%, about right 43.5%, total too much 13.3%.

¹¹ Eurobarometer 2005: QC9 "Thinking about development aid provided by the (NATIONALITY) Government, is this aid making any difference to improving the lives of poor people in developing countries (Africa, Latin America, Asia, etc.)?" Yes, no, don't know.

¹² This is a negative secular trend since 1996 from 74% yes and 7% no. Part of this can be accounted for by the change in the composition of the EU15 include the new Member States (EU25) (Eurobarometer 2005).

¹³ NB respondents tend to be more confident about MDG2 (primary education and gender equality = 41%) and MDG3 (health). With reference to MDG8 (building a global partnership), 59% believe that aid will be increased to countries who are committed to reducing poverty.

¹⁴ Another common theme is democracy promotion. 74% of EU citizens think that development aid should be used as an incentive for encouraging sustainable democracy.

¹⁵ 28% to help poor countries trade which will enable them to buy more products from rich countries; 28% to encourage global stability; 22% to encourage democracy and good governance; 20% to avoid citizens of these countries immigrating to rich countries; 19% to prevent and avoid favourable conditions for terrorism; 15% to gain political allies; 11% to have a clear conscience; 12% to help people who are in need (*spontaneously offered only*).

¹⁶ See Just World Scale, Rubin and Peplau 1975.