

The road from colonialism to emancipation

Debating aid in Belgium

Belgian development aid was once driven by self-interest. Over the last 15 years Belgium has made a more resolute effort to contribute to development.



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Belgium began its development aid effort in 1960. A large portion of this aid went to its former colonies – the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and

Burundi. Many Belgians who had worked in the colonies joined the Dienst voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking (Development Cooperation Service), which later became the Algemeen Bestuur voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking (General Board for Development Cooperation, ABOS). As a result, the colonial spirit continued to influence Belgian aid for many years. Rwanda, Burundi and the Congo remain among the poorest countries in the world, with Human Development Index rankings of 161, 167 and 168, respectively, out of 177 countries in 2007/2008. Although many factors have contributed to these countries' poor standing, it does not reflect very positively on the Belgian aid effort.

Belgian aid was dominated by geopolitical interests for many years. Between 1965 and 1989, enormous amounts of aid were sent to the Congo. During this time the Congo was ruled by the late Mobutu Sese Seko, whose name has become synonymous with corruption. Like many other Western countries, Belgium continued to support Mobutu because he played such a strategic role during the Cold War. In the words of Professor Ruddy Doom of Ghent University, 'He may have been a bastard, but he was our bastard'. Belgian aid strengthened the position of a leader who would eventually destroy the whole infrastructure of his country and the companies he nationalized.

But it was not only Belgium that closed its eyes to Mobutu's corruption. At the end of the 1970s, an International Monetary Fund (IMF) official used the word 'kleptocracy' to

Summary

- Since the late 1990s, many positive changes have been made to Belgian aid.
- Belgian expertise remains closely linked to Central Africa, which means that it has a strong focus on poor countries.
- In terms of coherence a lot of work remains to be done.
- Belgium is moving forward in terms of the scale of its aid, but still finds it difficult to fulfil its promises.

describe the Congo, but there was little reaction. Willy Kiekens, the long-serving Belgian executive director on the IMF board, calls the 'politicization' of IMF support during the Cold War as one of the fund's biggest mistakes.

Economic interests also influenced Belgian aid. In the decades following independence, a large number of Belgian companies continued to be active in the Congo. By providing aid, Belgium would easily be able to defend its own interests. This continued until 1974, when Mobutu started nationalizing the economy.

Some Belgian companies saw aid as a way of making large-scale projects easier to sell abroad – a kind of export subsidy. In this way, Belgian aid generated a large number of what became known as 'white elephants'. The bill for these had to be paid in the 1990s.

The 1990s: A turning point

After the end of the Cold War, Belgian aid to the Congo lost much of its geostrategic importance, and Belgium began to distance itself from the Mobutu regime. In Belgian political circles, there was growing belief that it would be better to focus development cooperation on countries where Belgium had no colonial past. Nevertheless, Belgium remained highly involved in Rwanda.

Since Rwanda's independence in 1962, Belgium had supported the majority regime of the Hutus. When the Tutsis invaded Rwanda in 1990, Belgium adopted a strategy of

By **John Vandaele**, journalist and author of *Het recht van de rijkste* and *De stille dood van het neoliberalisme*.



Jan Vandemoortele, a senior policy advisor at UNICEF, was a founding father of the MDGs. However, he has become critical of how the goals are being interpreted by the donor community.

reconciliation. The UN-sponsored Arusha plan was intended to bring peace by organizing elections and letting the party of the invading Tutsis, the Front Patriotique Rwandais, participate. The hope was that in doing so the rebels could be integrated into the Rwandan system. The plan went horribly wrong and when the plane carrying the president of Rwanda was shot down in April 1994, genocide followed. After ten Belgian paratroopers were killed, the Belgian government decided to withdraw all its troops from the UN peace mission. Moreover, at the UN in New York, Belgium called for the entire mission to be cancelled. This was one of the most dramatic foreign policy decisions ever taken by the Belgian government. After their military victory, the Tutsi rebels took a much more detached attitude toward Belgium, although Rwanda continued to top the list of countries receiving Belgian aid.

In the mid-1990s, the economic aspect of aid became the subject of criticism. The Belgian media devoted considerable attention to a series of projects that had been complete failures. The reports revealed that Belgian companies had repeatedly tailored projects for their own benefit, which was often far removed from the needs of the recipient countries.

They also made it clear that ABOS was not functioning very effectively, and did not do enough to resist commercial pressure. The Ministry of Finance also considered the interests of Belgian companies first when granting government-to-government loans. The staatssecretaris (junior minister) for development cooperation at the time, Reginald Moreels, took advantage of the negative publicity to subject Belgian aid to a thorough review.

A change of course...

In 1999, the Belgian Development Cooperation Act was approved. For the first time in almost 40 years, priorities for Belgian aid were laid out and its aim defined: 'to achieve sustainable human development by reducing poverty on the basis of partnerships'. The Act also specified that Belgian cooperation would focus on five sectors: basic healthcare, education, agriculture and food security, basic infrastructure, and conflict prevention and social development. Aid was also to be concentrated on specific countries.

Although the principle of untied aid was not specified in the act, sectoral specialization made it impossible for companies to continue to benefit from aid. Successive governments moreover did untie aid, and Belgium came to score well on this point. In the granting of government-to-government loans development relevance became one of the criteria, whereas before it seldom played any role.

In the late 1990s the administration of Belgian development cooperation was restructured. Belgium followed Germany's example of separating the Directorate-General for International Cooperation (DGOS), which was responsible for formulating policy and monitoring its implementation, and the Belgian Technical Cooperation (BTC), which took care of implementation.

Professor Robrecht Renard of the University of Antwerp claims it was not only the power of the commercial lobby that was curtailed in the 1990s. 'Until the end of the 1980s, Belgium still had around 1000 well paid official development specialists in the Congo, many of whom had been around in the colonial era. They lost their jobs when we stopped giving official support to Mobutu, so they came and demanded new jobs from the minister for development cooperation, where I was working at the time. Later, they all went to work for BTC, which realized that there was a lot of dead wood among them and quickly set about removing it. The BTC could do that much more quickly than DGOS, because of its autonomous status'.

Dirk Van der Maelen, deputy chairman of the Socialist Party and then chairman of a parliamentary committee that investigated the failures of Belgian aid, praises the reforms. 'Commercial contamination was a problem in the 1970s and 1980s. Thanks to the measures that were taken, however, there have been no more scandals in recent years. The fact that the themes identified in the 1999 Development Cooperation Act tie in so closely with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is the best proof that we were on the right track with the reforms'.

Still lagging behind

Belgium was, however, a slow learner in the field of budget support and for many years stuck steadfastly to the

Belgian research hubs

- The Institute of Development Policy and Management at the University of Antwerp carries out research on poverty and well-being as a local institutional process, aid policy and the impacts of globalization. The Institute also focuses on the political economy of the Great Lakes region of Central Africa. Staff include Philip Reyntjens, recognized Rwanda specialist, who together with Stefan Marysse edits the annual *L'Afrique des Grand Lacs*, a world standard on Central Africa (www.ua.ac.be/dev).
- The Conflict Research Group at the Faculty of Political and Social Studies (Centre for Third World Studies), Ghent University, studies the origins and dynamics of violent conflict and its impact on societies. The group has conducted extensive work in eastern Congo. Policy from time to time takes its findings into account (www.psw.ugent.be/ctws).
- The Research Group Sustainable Development at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven studies the role of NGOs and the fourth pillar of development cooperation (www.kuleuven.ac.be).
- In French-speaking Belgium, Jean-Philippe Platteau and his group at the Centre for Research in Economic Development, University of Namur, have gained an international reputation for their studies of the interaction between economic development and societies (www.fundp.ac.be).
- The faculty of African politics at the University of Liège specializes in Central Africa.

traditional project approach. Until only a few years ago the minister in charge of the budget had to approve every single intervention in the form of budget support.

Although in many other countries the development cooperation ministry or department is responsible for policy on the World Bank, sometimes together with the national finance ministry, this is hardly the case in Belgium. Between 1999 and 2002 the 'green' staatssecretaris (junior minister) for development cooperation, Eddy Boutmans, tried to change that, but met with considerable resistance. In 2001 the ministers of finance and foreign affairs, both liberals, signed a royal decree which explicitly stated that the Ministry of Finance was solely responsible for Belgium's policy on the World Bank. The fact that one or two development officials have been posted to the Belgian embassy in Washington since 2002 is a sign that there has been some progress.

'One major weakness of Belgian development cooperation', says Renard, 'is the lack of a strategic vision supported by all parties, parliament, NGOs and the media. That is much more the case in the UK or the Netherlands. Because Belgian governments are usually coalitions of at least four different parties, it is much more difficult to achieve coherence in policy because, for example, the ministers of foreign affairs and development cooperation often do not share the same views on policy'. On the other hand, the fact that Belgium itself is a fragile state with a politicized bureaucracy, according to Renard, means that the specialists it sends to developing countries are much more sensitive to their problems. 'Scandinavians and the Dutch are much pushier about telling people in developing countries how to do things and they expect everything to work out right immediately. They often don't realize how

difficult it is to bring about gradual change in a politicized situation'.

Coherence: words but little action

Coherence is another important theme in today's development cooperation. Coherence means ensuring, as a donor country, not only that the aid you provide is tailored to the interests of the recipient countries, but also that it does not clash with your own policies on trade, security, the environment, and so on. Former Minister for Development Cooperation, Armand De Decker, specified coherence as a priority when he took office in 2004, but little was heard of it after that.

Most Belgian politicians see the development cooperation portfolio as a consolation prize. Marc Verwilghen took office as minister in 2003 after having disappointed in the previous government as justice minister. In early interviews he denied that he was dissatisfied with his new role. He pledged to make the development cooperation portfolio one that people 'would fight for in four years' time', when the next government would be formed. Less than a year later, he left the job to become minister of economic affairs.

The coherence problem exists partly because, unlike Sweden or the Netherlands, Belgium does not use development cooperation to project the image of a 'moral superpower' in the international arena. That seemed to be changing when Guy Verhofstadt, Prime Minister from 1999 to 2007, expressed very distinctive viewpoints on a wide range of international issues such as cancelling debt, opening up markets to developing countries and, last but not least, increasing Belgium's official development assistance (ODA) to 0.7% of GNP by 2010.

Unfortunately, Verhofstadt failed to live up to these promises. When he left office in 2007 Belgian ODA stood at 0.43% of GNP. In 2003, Belgian aid suddenly rose to 0.6% of GNP, as a result of a large-scale cancellation of the Congo's debts. That is, however, misleading because the operation did not cost much – the debt was actually as good as worthless – and it did little to improve the Congo's financial situation, because it had not paid down the debt for several decades anyway.

By 2007 Belgian ODA had fallen back to 0.43% of GNP (a little over €1.4 billion) and is likely to rise slightly to 0.45% in 2008. The goal of 0.7% by 2010, however, seems out of reach. Yet in October of this year, despite the economic crisis, Minister for Development Cooperation Charles Michel proposed a budget that would bring Belgian aid to 0.6% of GNP by 2009, this time only partly due to the cancellation of the Congo's and Iraq's debts. It is a question of waiting to see what becomes of this proposal, and whether large-scale debt cancellation will be possible in 2010.

One thing is certain: the funds allocated to BTC to spend on Belgium's behalf are set to rise dramatically, both in general and especially in the Congo where BTC expenditures will rise from €120 million in 2002–2006 to €480 million in 2007–2012. That is a courageous but risky step in a country with such an unstable and, in some areas, non-existent government. And Belgium is venturing into the lion's den with a number of interesting programmes

that are precisely aimed at improving governance. These programmes ultimately appeal to the political will to tackle problems such as corruption and clientelism. Only time will tell if they succeed, especially given the often tense relations between Belgium and the Congo. The willingness of the international community, including China, to exert pressure on the Congo will also be a crucial factor.

Development cooperation has continued to have a low ranking in the Belgian political hierarchy. As a result, the ministers and secretaries of state are rarely political heavyweights and find it difficult to make their voices heard, despite the need to promote policy coherence. In addition, few members of parliament take real interest in development as a policy issue. But there are exceptions. Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel De Gucht, for example, prevented the Belgian public export insurance company Delcredere from insuring the renovation of a munitions factory in Tanzania because it conflicted with efforts to bring peace to the region.

Belgian NGOs

Belgium has a wide assortment of development NGOs. They range from large, highly professional organizations to a spectrum of small-scale initiatives. In almost every community in Belgium there are individuals and associations that concern themselves with development issues.

Most Flemish NGOs have united under the umbrella organization 11.11.11., which has 341 local committees spread over the 180 municipalities. ‘Most of our international colleagues are very jealous of our wide grassroots base’, says Bogdan Vandenberghe, secretary of 11.11.11. The Flemish NGO Broederlijk Delen has a very extensive network while, in financial terms, Médecins sans Frontières – which provides mainly emergency medical aid – is the largest, followed by Oxfam-Solidariteit.

Most NGOs run projects in the South. The larger organizations also conduct political campaigns, which have a twofold objective: raising awareness (sometimes combined with influencing policy) and fundraising. The two objectives are not always compatible, but most NGOs acquire more than half of their funding from government in one way or another. There has been much criticism in Flanders – in particular by the think tank De Ekstermolengroep – that NGOs are too fragmented to have much impact.

Vandenberghe disagrees, pointing out that ‘the minister for development cooperation listens to what we have to say about the quantity and quality of ODA. Our political campaigning on the debt burden and the Tobin tax has paid off. And we should be pleased with the progress we have made on mining too, now that Minister Karel de Gucht has made it clear that raw material extraction in developing countries must benefit local populations. That is 100% our line of thinking. Studies show, however, that people still see us as a charity organization, while that is not our main approach’.

In addition to the more or less professionalized sector, there has been increasing attention in recent years for the ‘fourth pillar’ of development cooperation: the fine-mesh

Belgian coherence

Belgium does not yet assess the extent of its own policy coherence. On the Commitment to Development Index, with which the Centre for Global Development tries to measure coherence, Belgium has for several years been ranked 15 out of 21 donors.

- Belgium scores reasonably well (ranked 6th) for actual aid volume, of which only 6% is tied. A large proportion of aid also goes to the poorest countries.
- Belgium is also ranked 6th in terms of coherence between development and environment policy. It imposes high taxes on fuel, provides few subsidies to its fisheries sector, and succeeded in reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 2.7% between 1995 and 2005. Emissions remain very high, however, at 1.38 tonnes per capita (ranked 17th).
- Belgium scores very badly on security (20th place), due to its exports of large quantities of weapons to poor and undemocratic countries.
- Belgium has failed to make migration a development instrument (15th place), and relatively few uneducated immigrants from developing countries have been able to settle permanently in Belgium.

network of thousands of private, usually small-scale initiatives for cooperation between North and South. According to Patrick Develtere of Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, who has studied the fourth pillar, it weighs in almost as heavily financially as the officially recognized NGOs.

Research: top of the Great Lakes

After all the turbulence and changes that have characterized the relationship between Belgium and its former colonies, one thing remains certain: Belgium and the Belgians possess a great deal of expertise on Central Africa and the Great Lakes Region.

The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren has an enormous collection of ethnographic, zoological and geological material from the region. It also conducts research in a wide variety of areas, as a result of which departments like geology, anthropology and contemporary history have built up a considerable international reputation.

The Institute for Tropical Medicine in Antwerp is a world leader in knowledge of health, healthcare and disease in the Central African region. It is no coincidence that the Belgian Peter Piot, who led the UNAIDS programme for many years, comes from the institute. Thematically health care is certainly one of the strongest sectors of Belgian aid.

Belgium has a number of university centres focusing on research for development and development cooperation, many of which specialize in Central Africa. A ‘PRSP policy support centre’ has been set up at the University of Antwerp (www.ua.ac.be/bos). The government has ‘drawing rights’ on the centre’s researchers for a specific number of days, for support in developing policy.

Interactions between specialized Belgian academics, NGO workers, journalists and politicians of course help to deepen the knowledge of Central Africa. That knowledge is internationally recognized and gives Belgium a place among the leading countries when problems in the region are addressed. ■