

## Go-to guys

I do not consider myself expert on development assistance, but perhaps I am something of an expert on international security.

The current Dutch government, consisting as it does of a centre-right coalition supported by Geert Wilders' anti-Islam Party for Freedom, has put development assistance under immense pressure. In fact, it is questioning the very purpose of development assistance. It is more interested in economic diplomacy and national export interests than in the intrinsic goal of development cooperation.

Let me look then, on a whim of hyperrealism, for an argument that might appeal to this cabinet. It may be a bad argument in the eyes of some, but nonetheless one that this cabinet probably has more ears for than the voice of idealism.

Wikileaks can lend us a helping hand in this endeavour.

It published the parting cable, dated 22 August 2005, of American ambassador to the Netherlands, Clifford Sobel. His cable clearly explains why the United States considers Dutch development assistance so significant and why the Dutch are ultimately called the 'go-to guys' of Europe, even though the Netherlands is such a small country. It is unlikely that the United States sees it any differently now, six years later.

This is not to say that the United States does not endorse the intrinsic goals of development assistance, but in their view it has strategic importance too. Americans see the Dutch as almost a superpower in the area of development assistance. Sobel's parting cable calls the Netherlands one of 'the world's leading aid donors', a 'top donor of unearmarked assistance to UN humanitarian programs'.

Sobel goes on to say that the public-private partnership model embraced by the Netherlands – think, for example, of the USAID involvement in the Heineken HIV/AIDS treatment and education programme in Rwanda – 'has been particularly successful'. Indeed, the model has been adopted by the World Bank.

'Dutch creativity and credibility in development,' Sobel says, 'makes them good partners for future joint initiatives with the US.' And in terms of 'experience and insights,' the Dutch are the choice partners 'to help shift global aid efforts in the direction of sustainable long-term development'.

It strikes the ambassador that these assets have enabled the Netherlands to solidify their access to Africa.

Whether the Dutch feel comfortable with this role or not is one thing, but to Americans they are 'credible partners' in a



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broader strategic agenda. Other passages in the Wikileaks cable attest to this.

Sobel points out, for example, that the Netherlands is 'the fourth-largest provider of assistance to Africa world-wide'. The ambassador observes (though do not forget the cable dates from 2005) that the Dutch parliament expressed clear support for peace missions in Africa.

Americans consider the notion of *security* as part of a broader definition of development a tremendous find, because phrased in this way it mentally prepares other countries to establish a security presence as well. 'Senior Dutch military officials,' writes Sobel, 'say they are considering expanding their military presence in Africa to include Burundi, Rwanda, Eastern Congo, Botswana, Zambia, and Ivory Coast, adding new "eyes and ears" on the ground.'

The Netherlands also wants to 'coordinate their actions with the US and other allies,' according to Sobel's cable. These kinds of moves are significant in two ways. They should 'provide a secure environment for what is already one of the most ambitious assistance programmes in the world ... while the focus on security as an aspect of development provides an attractive justification for potential European partners'. Dutch credibility has made the Netherlands a 'clearinghouse', as Sobel puts it. If that is how the Dutch see it, then others countries can use them as an excuse.

This mixture of military-strategic and development interests could give rise to second thoughts. It might even be considered undesirable, but it is a fact of life.

The marriage between security and development assistance is similar to a question raised recently by the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers. 'Should the business sector be allowed to make a profit from development assistance?'

The confederation answered with a clear 'yes'. Should security profit from development assistance? One could argue that this question deserves more of a 'yes' than the first. So let the Netherlands, on this basis, remain a credible partner. The security-development assistance tandem is one of the few areas where the Netherlands is not on the asking side but on the supplying side: the go-to guys. ■