



The Rise & Fall of Dutch Commitment to Development. What next?

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1 The puzzle

When I grew up in the 1980s and the 1990s, international solidarity was a natural way of life for me as a Dutch boy in a small village. In the evenings, my mother would write long letters on thin blue airmail paper to governments that were holding political prisoners. Amnesty International would tell its members to whom to write letters, and my mother gladly obliged. I was honored to be able to put the stamps on the airmail envelopes and bring them to the post office. On Saturday mornings, my parents would operate—together with a group of volunteers—a fair-trade shop, *een wereldwinkel*, next to the parish of the church. Occasionally I was allowed to come with my father to the fair-trade depot in the center of the country and collect honey, coffee, tea and other merchandise. Maybe I was most fascinated with the two Foster Parents Children that my parents sponsored via the NGO Foster Parents Plan. I still remember one of their names: Ikitut Salandra, in Indonesia, and the letters and pictures they sent.

Since the teacher had a hard time keeping me busy at the village primary school, they allowed me to write as many essays as I liked, and I found recently in my archive that one of those essays was about Foster Parents Plan.

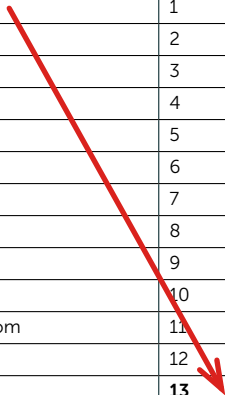
My first internship was with Foster Parents Plan in Cameroon 24 years ago. There I realized that behind this façade of nice letters and pictures, complex machinery was at work—machinery that sometimes fueled local divisions, reproduced international inequalities, and was often extremely inefficient. So while the Dutch commitment to development might look and sound beautiful, it certainly had ugly faces.

At primary school we were obliged to read the SamSam, which was a government sponsored journal which 80% of all 7 – 11-year-olds received, and focused on international solidarity (IOB, 2014, p.110). It just shows that no efforts were spared to nudge the Dutch towards solidarity. I am not idealizing this past: much of the international solidarity was based on feelings of superiority, best exemplified by the song all Dutch kids—including me—were singing out loud during national charity campaigns, which went like this: *‘een kind onder de evenaar, wordt later vaak een bedelaar’* (a kid living below the equator is likely to become a beggar’).

The Netherlands was not just a self-pronounced ‘guiding’ country in international development, but also internationally recognized as such. How did the Dutch—between the 1960s until the 2000s become and stay so committed to international development? That is one part of the puzzle I would like to solve today, but there is a reverse side of that coin that I would like to understand as well: the seemingly spectacular downfall of the Netherlands and its citizens as being committed to development.

Table 1: The position of the Netherlands on the Commitment to Development Index

2003		2023	
Rank	Country	Rank	Overall
1	Netherlands	1	Sweden
2	Denmark	2	Portugal
3	Portugal	3	Germany
4	New Zealand	4	France
5	Switzerland	5	United Kingdom
6	Germany	6	Czechia
7	Spain	7	Spain
8	Sweden	8	Greece
9	Austria	9	South Africa
10	Norway	10	Finland
11	United Kingdom	11	Slovak Republic
12	Belgium	12	Canada
13	Greece	13	Netherlands



Sources: Center for Global Development (n.d.). Data for 2023 GDP-weighted (not available 2003). Note: if not corrected for GDP, the Dutch are 6th in 2023.

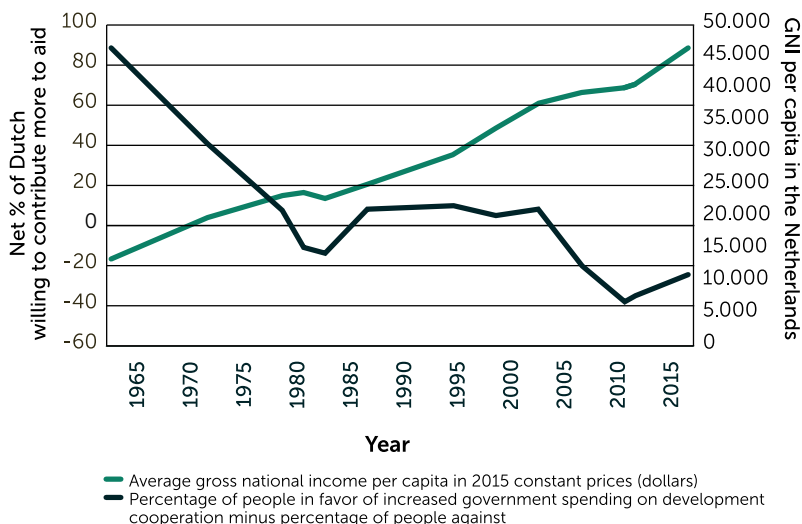
The Netherlands fell from the pole-position in 2003 (when it was first measured) to the 13th place in 2023 (the last measurement).

With commitment to development, I mean all the policies of a government and practices of its citizens that affect the social, economic and political development of the countries in the so-called Global South. You can think of for instance the sharing (or not) of patents of life-saving vaccines, the prohibition (or not) of the export of weapons to countries in conflict, the facilitation (or not) of tax evasion from those countries: so, it is not just about foreign aid, but about many domains such as trade, security and financial flows.

By analyzing its initial rise and its fall I will propose a vision to recast the Dutch commitment to international development, one without the weaknesses of the previous system and with more alignment with both global challenges and the priorities of Dutch society.

Here's the puzzle we're trying to solve: over the past 60 years, the Dutch became much wealthier. You might expect that this would translate into more global solidarity — but in fact, we see the opposite. The Dutch have become less committed to international development when looking at their willingness to pay for it via taxation.

Figure 1: Dutch commitment for extra public expenditures on development cooperation & average gross national income per capita

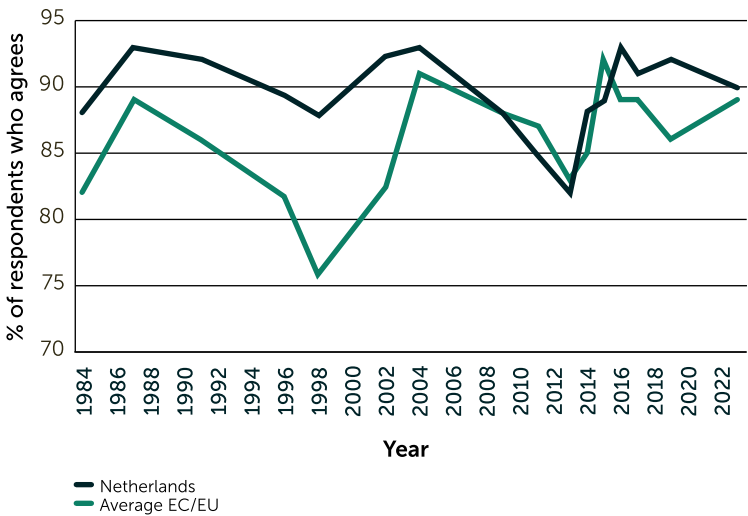


Sources: public support data 1962 – 1978 Voorhoeve (1979) & 1998 – 2002 Slendebroek (2013), 2006 IOB (2009), 2010 & 2011 NCDO (2011) and 2016 Kaleidos research (2016). GDP data are from World Bank (n.d.)

Figure 1 shows that while on average we got richer—in financial terms—the percentage of people who thought public funding for development should increase minus those who thought it should decrease has plummeted, even after public funding for development decreased.

For several decades, the Dutch citizens were among the most committed global citizens in Europe, when looking at their attitudes. In this longitudinal and comparative graph, it becomes visible that compared to fellow-Europeans the Dutch were substantially more likely to respond positively to the question whether they found that people in poor countries should be supported. This changed around 2007, when the Dutch weren't positive outliers anymore. This shows the puzzle that we will try to solve today.

Figure 2: Is it important to help people in developing countries?



Sources: European Commission (n.d.) Eurobarometers from 1985 until 2023. Please note the number of European countries increased from 10 during this period to 27.

A closer look at the Dutch story could help explain why the global development sector is in crisis. While each donor country is different, the ‘war-on-woke’ is sweeping across the Western world. Populist radical right-wing parties are gaining power, cutting pro-development policies such as foreign aid (Mawdsley et al., 2025). They frame aid as an elite policy wasted on outsiders instead of supporting their own citizens. Development policies have thus become casualties of the culture wars and must be understood within these broader societal shifts (Fischer, 2020).

The consequences are severe. Official Development Assistance (ODA) fell 9% in 2024 and is projected to decline further in 2025 (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2025). The Lancet estimates USAID's abrupt funding cuts could cause 8–19 million additional deaths (Cavalcanti et al., 2025). Donors are also failing on global commitments such as biodiversity and climate funding, with resources far below agreed targets (Seek Development, 2025).

We should not aim to restore “peak-aid.” Foreign aid had many flaws—from superiority complexes to inefficiency—well documented in past critiques by ISS colleagues (Fischer, 2018; Hilhorst et al., 2021). As Opalo (2025) notes, there is no need to “mourn” aid's decline. Instead, as Altaf and Manya (2025) argue, this crisis may mark the end of the charity paradigm and the rise of a dignity economy—where African and other Global South nations chart their own development paths through competition and innovation.

Still, global cooperation is indispensable. COVID claimed over 7 million lives (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.); more than 33 million displaced people live in high-income countries (UNHCR, n.d.) and we are surpassing 1.5°C of heating with increasingly extreme weather events (Copernicus, 2025) and worldwide the freedom of academics is under pressure. *Free to Think 2024* documents 391 attacks on scholars, students, and institutions in 51 countries. The absolute low point has been Gaza, where the Israeli government has deliberately demolished all universities (Scholars at Risk, 2025). None of these challenges can be solved by nations alone: our destinies are shared. North–South collaboration is a necessity. With a renewed commitment, we must leave behind the shameful aspects of Dutch development—racism, disguised export-promotion, inefficiency—while preserving its strengths: activism, solidarity, and mobilization across borders.

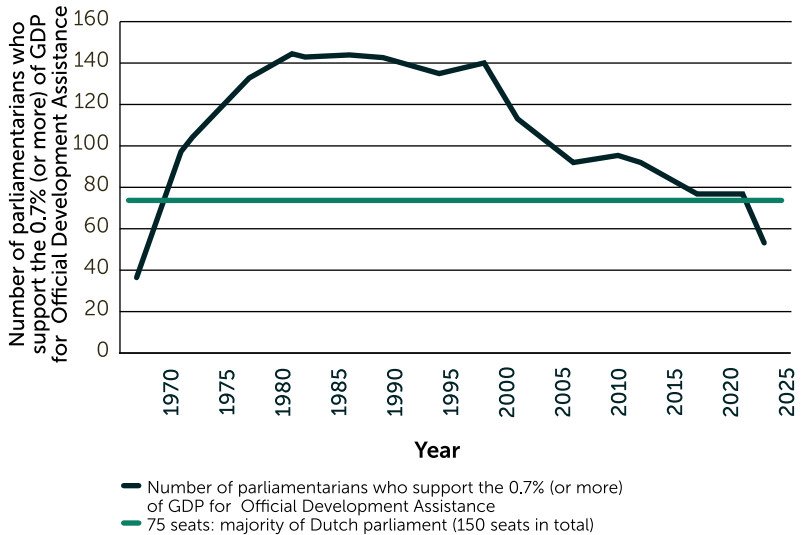
2 The evidence

To understand Dutch commitment to development, we need to break it down. I'll be examining four key roles that Dutch citizens play: As voters, donors, consumers, and volunteers. Together, these lenses offer a holistic view of societal support for development.

2.1 The Dutch as voters

Figure 2 presents my analysis of election programs from Dutch political parties over the decades, showing that support for international development once figured prominently — but that has gradually faded. During the 1960s and 1970s we see the parties that support the 0.7% commitment, the international target for development assistance, grew. In the 1970s and 1980s even liberal-conservative parties, such as the VVD, and also orthodox Christian parties, such as the SGP, embraced the 0.7%. In the 1980s only the tiny extreme left communist parties, and the tiny extreme right party opposed the 0.7%, for different reasons. This broad consensus continued until the early 2000s, when the conservative VVD no longer supported the percentage and more right-wing and populist parties gained traction in Dutch elections.

Figure 3: The rise and fall of support in Dutch parliament for development aid

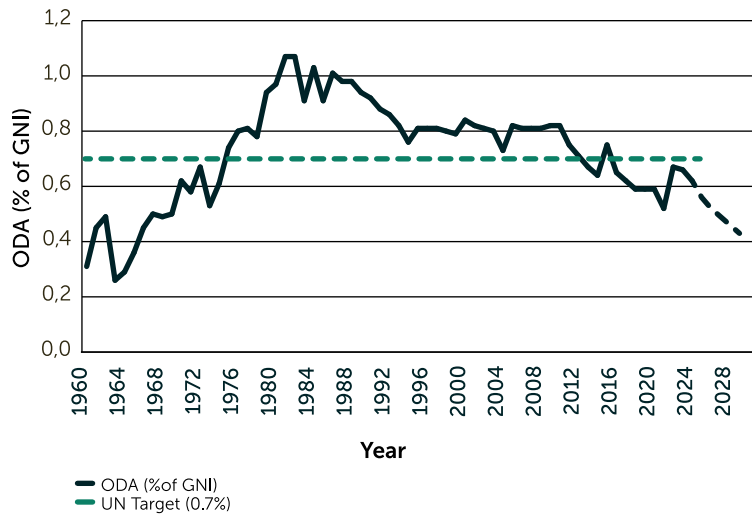


Source: Koch (2025). Compiled based on textual analysis of election programs of political parties

2.2 The Dutch as donors

As donors, the Dutch story is similar. Over the decades the level of public funding has declined, from above 1% of the GDP in the 1980s to well below in the 2010s. And while we shouldn't idealize the aid that was provided in the 1980s, as Dutch companies were still some of the main receivers of the foreign aid, the % of aid that was spent on non-development-related issues, like the reception of asylum seekers, was much higher in the 2010s and 2020s.

Figure 4: Netherlands ODA (% of GNI), 1960–2023

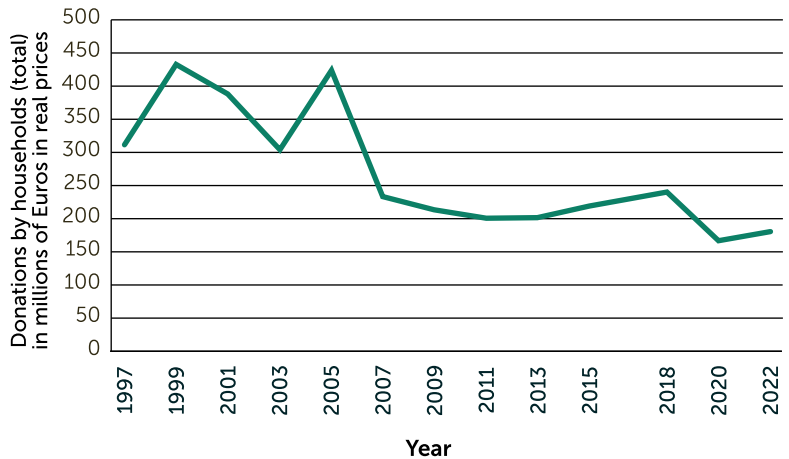


Source: United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (n.d.) Net official development assistance (ODA) as a percentage of OECD-DAC donors GNI (grant equivalent methodology), % For the projections (2025 - 2029) Ministerie van Financiën (2025) Voorjaarsnota was used.

So, the actual level of aid was even lower in the 2020s. But has this decline in public funding been replaced by an uptake in private funding? This is also not the case. In the early 1960s there were fewer national campaigns, but when they were organized the financial contributions were much higher. (Wiepking & van Leeuwen, 2013, complemented with own data). With less media choice, people only had 2 TV channels and 2 radio stations, the Dutch were force-fed international solidarity campaigns, with success.

If we correct for inflation in the Netherlands, we see that individual giving by household by charities between 1997 and 2022 actually declined by 50%, while public giving also declined.

Figure 5: The fall of donations by Dutch households to international causes (real prices)



Source: Centre for Philanthropic Studies, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (2024)
'Giving in the Netherlands Panel Survey – GINPSv9' Transformed to real 1997 prices.

2.3 The Dutch as consumer

Now let's talk about consumer behavior, and let's separate that into two parts: 'do no harm', and 'do good'. With 'do no harm' I mean that consumers, when making their choices, are taking the effects of these on the populations elsewhere (and in the future) into consideration.

We know that for instance meat consumption harms biodiversity and contributes to an acceleration of climate change, because of the deforestation it can induce. Low-income countries, especially low-income people in those countries, are both more exposed to the effects of climate change and have less capacity to protect themselves against it. The environmental footprint of eating meat, especially beef, hence being substantial, we could potentially see a decline in its consumption over the decades if the Dutch would take the spill-over effect on low income countries seriously into consideration. However, despite all the meat-substitutes, we see that that Dutch have doubled their meat intake over the decades.

In a similar vein, we could see a decline in holiday flights (a source of CO₂ emissions) over the decades. But here we see a more than 10-fold increase on a per capita annual basis over the decades. So, while there might be some talk about reducing holiday flights, there is a disconnect between what we say and what we do.

Figure 6: Carbon intensive consumption: Holiday flights and meat consumption per capita

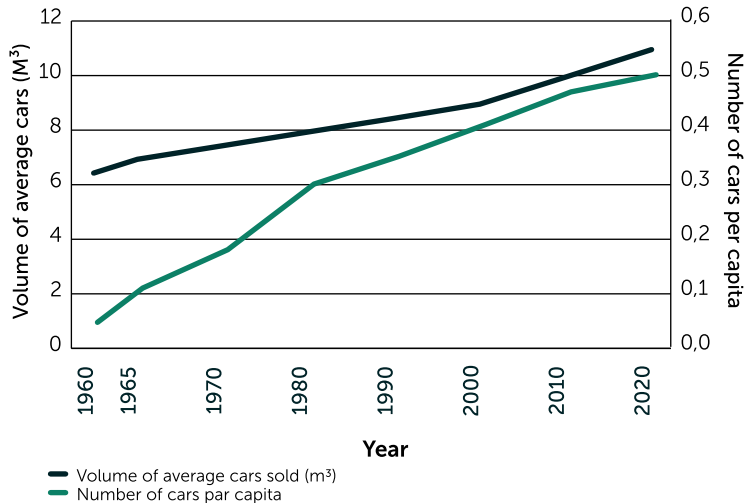


Sources: Dagevos, H., & Verbeke, W. (2022). *Meat consumption and flexitarianism in the Low Countries*. *Meat Science*, 192, 108894 and TNS Nipo (2007) *Trendanalyse van het Nederlandse vakantiegedrag van 1969 tot 2040* and Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (n.d.) *Vakanties van Nederlanders*

This also appears to hold for car consumption: while there is a buzz around the sharing economy, which is welcome from an environmental footprint perspective, we see that more Dutch people are owning cars and that these cars are getting fatter. While it is impossible to link the ‘S.U.V.-ification’ directly to negative development outcomes, the increased environmental footprint of mobility in the Global North creates an extra rush for resources—and could be associated with increased pollution and conflict—in the Global South.

So, most Dutch consumers do not tend to let concerns about negative spillover effects determine their choices: we just love the comfort of nice cars, the experience of long-distance travel and the taste of meat and find that more important than potential effects.

Figure 7: Car consumption in the Netherlands



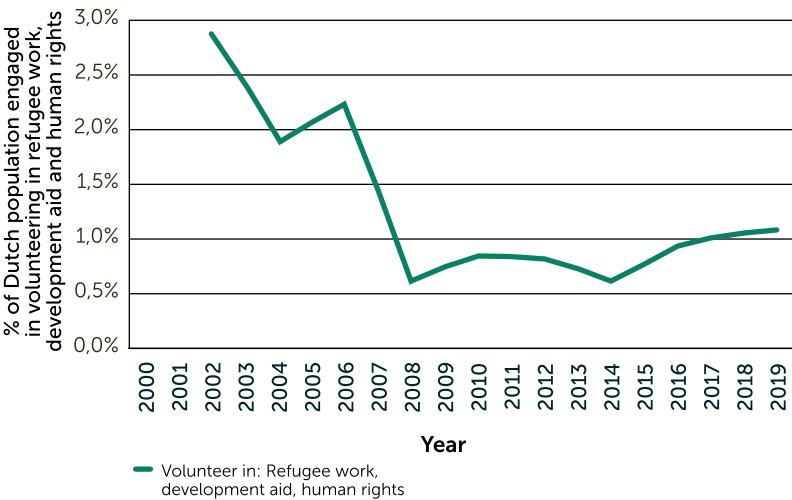
Sources: *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (2023) Nederland in cijfers. Hoeveel auto's zijn er?* & *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (2025) Passenger cars keep getting longer, wider and heavier.*

Interestingly, when it comes to 'doing good' through our consumption, a different pattern emerges: we see that for instance fair trade bananas and cacao have become mainstream and so have ethical banking. The degree to which consumers actually chose for this chocolate or bananas because of ethical considerations, is less certain. Their easy availability might be just as important, as many Dutch appear not really willing to walk an extra mile to get access to these products. This can be seen by the marked decline of fair trade shops in the Netherlands which declined from approximately 400 in the early 2000s to about 80 today.

2.4 The Dutch as volunteers and activists

Let's move to the last component: volunteering and activism. They used to be pillars of Dutch global solidarity. That spirit seems to have faded: while in the early 2000s about 3% of the Dutch population was volunteering for international development or refugee reception in the Netherlands, this has declined to about 1% of the population.

Figure 8: Volunteering for international development



Source: Centre for Philanthropic Studies of the VU (2024) 'Giving in the Netherlands Panel Survey - GINPSv9'

I thought for a while that, keeping the growing trend of individualism in mind, this decline could be explained by people setting up their own Private Development Initiatives, such as building a school in Kenya or a medical facility in the Gambia. While indeed there are still over a hundred private Dutch development initiatives active in countries such as Uganda and Gambia, the heyday of the emergence of Private Development Initiatives seems to be over (Kinsbergen & Molthof, 2022, p.7).

3 The rise

International commitment was part of a broader progressive Dutch identity. The Netherlands had already been a leader in areas such as gay rights, drug policy, medical ethics, and peace movements, and development cooperation naturally fit within this moral and political tradition. Similar trends emerged in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Historians generally point to three main —non-exhaustive—sets of factors shaping this development: historical, cultural, and political.

3.1 The interplay between historical, cultural and political factors

After the loss of Indonesia, the Netherlands was no longer a colonial middle power but a small nation with limited hard power. In this new geopolitical reality, it sought influence through principled engagement with the Third World (Kuitenbrouwer, 1994; Voorhoeve, 1979). By becoming a frontrunner in international development, it could still “punch above its weight” as a moral superpower, in line with its long-standing self-image as a progressive refuge for persecuted minorities since the 16th century. Another historical element was path dependency. During the era of ‘ethical colonialism,’ Dutch missionaries and colonial administrators had worked to ‘civilize’ native populations. In the post-colonial period, this mission shifted from “civilization” to “development,” allowing many to continue their work in a new guise (Nekkers & Malcontent, 2000), sending messages home about the need for development assistance via the Sunday services. Scandinavian missionaries played a similar role in mobilizing public support for solidarity, but the Dutch —having a recent colonial past—were even more motivated to redefine their place in the world order.

Culturally, post-materialist values gained significant ground in the Netherlands during the 1960s and 1970s. According to Inglehart (1977), the Dutch showed one of the strongest shifts in Europe, with many in the postwar generation seeking *meaningful* rather than purely *financial* work. A second cultural driver was the Netherlands’ strong ecumenical tradition (Kennedy, 2006). As the pillarized structure of society broke down, younger generations embraced cross-denominational initiatives such as the Interchurch Peace Council (IKV). Even as traditional religious practices declined, spiritually inspired, forward-looking church projects remained popular. This pattern

was also visible in the Scandinavian countries. For every country that lived under a dictatorship, there appeared to be a solidarity committee!

Politically, Dutch leaders in the late 1960s and 1970s, unlike de Gaulle in France, chose to engage with—rather than suppress—progressive youth (Kennedy, *ibid.*). Prime ministers such as De Jong and Biesheuvel sought to channel new social energies into political participation, integrating young activists into traditional party structures and public institutions. Social-democratic parties, which held over one-third of the seats in parliament, began expanding their ambitions from building a domestic welfare state to promoting an international social-welfare model (Stokke, 2019). Christian-democrats also placed international solidarity high on the agenda. In all four countries, governments invested heavily in development education to build public support for global citizenship, which reinforced the cultural post-materialist values.

3.2 The Pronk Factor

While these explanations for the rise of international solidarity in the Netherlands and its Scandinavian peers are compelling, they tend to underplay the influence of individual actors who decisively shaped public debate. In Norway, UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie brought the message of solidarity home in the early 1950s; in Sweden, Dag Hammarskjöld played a similar catalytic role in the late 1950s. The Netherlands lacked a comparable global statesman who championed international development—aside from Nobel Laureate Jan Tinbergen—but it did have Jan Pronk: a gifted, tireless, and forward-looking political mobilizer, and former professor of the Institute of Social Studies.

Pronk's public career spanned more than six decades, including over 17 years as a cabinet minister—second only to Luns in Dutch political history. His role in keeping international development at the forefront of Dutch politics for roughly thirty years is hard to overstate. Even during his 11-year absence from government (1978–1989), policy priorities and budgetary allocations for development remained remarkably stable, despite unemployment exceeding 12% and widespread public spending cuts.

This resilience was no accident. Pronk deliberately engineered what could be called a 'lock-in effect', built on three interlinked strategies: cooptation, fixation of policy choices, and strategic communication. He constructed a Dutch development regime. By understanding how he built the Dutch development regime, we can learn how to reinvent it.

Cooptation—Pronk ensured that every major societal actor had a tangible stake in development policy. The PUM program engaged retired senior managers to provide technical expertise in developing countries. NGOs received funding tied to the strength of their domestic constituencies, ensuring broad grassroots engagement. Trade unions were subsidized to start international branches, municipalities to build city partnerships abroad, political parties and their scientific institutes to develop overseas programs, academics to establish partnerships with institutions in the Global South, and journalists to report on development projects. In effect, Pronk created a 'whole-of-society' approach before the term existed—drawing in employers, employees, politicians, scholars, and media alike.

Fixation of policy choices—Pronk anchored priorities in binding commitments that would outlast his tenure. The Suriname independence agreement pledged 3.5 billion guilders in ODA, funds that remained central to bilateral relations well into the 1990s. In the 1990s, he signed mutual accountability agreements with Bhutan, Benin, and Costa Rica, constraining successors for another decade.

Strategic communication—Pronk also understood the importance of public opinion. He built an extensive communication infrastructure to cultivate support from an early age. The SamSam magazine instilled values of global awareness and responsibility. Adults received the free journal 'Internationale Samenwerking', which reached 100,000 subscribers. When his budget was threatened, Pronk deployed television campaigns that framed development not only as a moral imperative but also as serving Dutch self-interest.

In sum, Pronk's legacy lies not merely in policy innovations but in the creation of a durable development regime of institutions, actors, and narratives that kept international development a central pillar of Dutch foreign policy for decades.

Ultimately, while the Dutch commitment to international development was not without self-interest or mixed results, from the late 1960s through the 1990s it was extraordinary. The Netherlands often ranked first or second globally in fair trade shops, Greenpeace, and Amnesty membership. The presence of Europe's premier development studies institute, the ISS, in The Hague reflects this legacy. The ISS is part and parcel of the Dutch development regime. Yet with the wider development regime crumbling, institutes like the ISS could now face the risk of collapse. Let us turn to the fall to see what is happening and what lies ahead.

4 The fall

4.1 Historical, cultural and political factors in reverse

Table 2: Overview of factors contribution to an explanation of the rise and fall of Dutch commitment to development

Factors contributing to rise in 1960s/1970s	Reversed factors after 2000s
Historical factors	
Colonial hangover / national branding	Declining image of guide country
Missionary & civil servants' path dependency	Reduction of Dutch development workers
Cultural factors	
Post-materialism	Decline in post-materialism
Strong ecumenical movement	Secularization
Political factors	
Authorities permissive of progressives	Authorities permissive of counterrevolutionaries
International projection of welfare state	Decline of social & Christian democratic parties
Investment in public development education	No investment in public development education

Historically, national identity and branding and the associated concept of soft power were long-standing drivers of Dutch engagement in international development and justice. As part of its internationalist outlook, the Netherlands contributed actively to peacekeeping operations—most notably in Lebanon during the 1980s and Bosnia during the 1990s. This image of a progressive and principled guide country was severely damaged by the 1995 genocide in Srebrenica, which occurred in a UN ‘safe area’ under the protection of Dutch blue helmets. Domestic events soon compounded the reputational blow: the 2002 assassination of politician Pim Fortuyn by an environmental activist, and the 2004 killing of filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim extremist. Together, these incidents dismantled the carefully cultivated national brand, leaving a contested debate over what image should replace it.

In earlier decades, the presence of Dutch colonial administrators, missionaries, and technical experts in the Global South had reinforced ties between development work and the Dutch public. By the early 2000s, however, this approach was criticized as neo-colonial. Minister Herfkens famously argued

that “Dutch white doctors” should not run African hospitals (Hoebink, 2002). While replacing expatriate staff with national professionals was correct from this perspective, it also severed a vital communication link between workers in low income countries and public engagement at home, as tropical doctors, water engineers, and junior experts were no longer funded.

Culturally, the Netherlands experienced a marked shift in values from the late 20th century onward. In the 1970s, Dutch citizens—particularly younger generations—were more post-materialist than their European peers, but post-materialist attitudes declined by over 10% between 1990 and 1999 and have remained low. Rising wealth inequality (Toussaint et al., 2020), combined with a more precarious labor market and housing insecurity (Gielens & Muis, 2022), increased economic anxieties and appear to have shifted priorities toward material concerns, even among younger, highly educated groups. They worry that their kids will have tougher times than they are experiencing. In sum, the ecumenical and progressive spirit of the 1960s gave way to accelerated secularization in the 1990s and, eventually, a belated cultural conservative counter-revolution. Political figures such as Fortuyn, Bolkestein, and Wilders tapped into public unease over migration. They framed development aid, in sync with populist backlash across the Global North, as “a left-wing hobby”. In doing so, they turned it “into a powerful vehicle for mobilizing conservative and reactionary populist sentiments ... based on segregation, exclusion and subordination” (Fischer, 2020, p. 272).

Politically, the Netherlands retained its tradition of leaders who channeled, rather than suppressed, prevailing social currents. The difference was that these currents were no longer led by progressive internationalists but by inward-looking conservatives. Under Prime Ministers Balkenende and Rutte, governing coalitions included radical right parties. Meanwhile, the social democrats—once bold enough to champion a ‘worldwide welfare state’ and command more than one-third of the vote—had not won a national election since 1998, limiting their ability to project an internationalist agenda.

In sum, the same historical, cultural, and political forces that had propelled the rise of Dutch international development, when reversed, became central to its decline.

4.2 Dismantling the Dutch development system

The Dutch development system, crafted by Pronk, consisted of three components: cooptation, strategic communication and fixation. What happened to these pillars? Instead of a whole-of-society approach with fixed engagements, the Dutch development regime has crumbled into a flexible elite affair, making it an easy—and even beloved—target of the conservative counter revolution.

Cooptation: Some pillars remain (political parties, municipalities, trade unions, and NGOs still maintain international programs), though the Dutch government has cut back on funding. Yet higher education programs that once trained and connected professionals across borders have largely disappeared.

Fixation: Unlike the 1970s, when the Dutch pushed to enshrine ODA targets in treaties, today's governments resist binding commitments. This is visible in their dismissive stance on a loss and damage fund in climate negotiations and reluctance to pledge biodiversity finance.

Strategic communication: Conservative-led governments dismantled key initiatives and institutions that had sustained public support, such as SamSam, Internationale Samenwerking, and the national agency for global citizenship. Conservative media found a fertile ground when they capitalized on some of the mistakes of the aid actors and contributed actively to the distrust in the effectiveness of support.

The large 'red line' rallies earlier this year were a very welcome exception to the rule. This exception was not a coincidence, but the consequence of thoughtful planning and perseverance by the organizers, including investing in social media, notably Instagram, and reaching out to new allies, such as Islamic organizations. There are other positive signs: global citizenship principles such as equality and interdependence are more strongly endorsed by the Dutch in 2025 than in 2012 according to the latest public survey by Kinsbergen (Kinsbergen et al., 2025). This indicates a growing awareness of global interconnectedness. However, the principle of shared responsibility—the bridge between belief and behavior—is lagging behind. Although the Dutch seem to understand we are all in the same boat worldwide, this does not automatically lead to greater shared responsibility or the willingness to act on it personally.

5 The Future

Populism isn't the cause of the decline in commitment to development, but rather a symptom of a non-productive system, characterized by inequality that is rising, a democracy that is not delivering and technology that is polarizing. We need a system change. Realizing that could be a stretch, we should reinvent a Dutch development system that is more resistant to the turbulent times we are traversing.

The world looks nothing like it did when the age of international development began in the 1960s. Back then, poverty, hunger, and illiteracy in the Global South were the defining problems of their time. Today, despite entrenched poverty, many citizens in the South are healthier, wealthier, and better educated. But while people's lives have improved, the planet around them has grown dirtier, harsher, and less free.

Freedom itself is in retreat. For the first time in over twenty years, autocracies outnumber democracies worldwide (Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, 2025). In 2024 alone, sixty countries slipped backwards—including EU members like Italy and Croatia (Freedom House, 2025). It was also the deadliest year for journalists since 1992 (Committee to Protect Journalists, n.d.). Repression of scholars is also increasing: to give it a face, a scholar like Dr. Encieh Erfani from Iran can't go back to her country for speaking out for women's rights.

Yes, hunger and disease still exist in the Global South and should be a focus of development studies (Fischer, 2019), but they no longer have the same reach they had in the 1960s. And yes, war and displacement persist—but now they scar the Global North as well. The dividing line that once separated 'their' problems from 'ours'—which was always dotted—has disappeared. The challenges of this century—climate breakdown, authoritarianism, shrinking civic space—are global. They touch all of us, no matter where we live.

We are all in the same boat. If a new development system is to matter, it must be recast on that thinking: the fate of one is bound up with the fate of all. Rising authoritarianism in China, for instance, is not a distant problem. It reaches into Dutch universities, where academic freedom is curtailed (Clingendael, 2024, p.19). It shapes Dutch media, where journalists face growing

pressures (source Brouwers & Kamerling, 2024, p.29). It even silences voices in the Chinese diaspora, often Dutch citizens, in the Netherlands (Safeguard Defender, 2022, p.13). What happens 'there' reverberates here.¹

Also, the Netherlands today is a profoundly different society than it was in the 1960s and 1970s, yet the development sector has not sufficiently adapted to these shifts. Three transformations stand out: deep individualization, large-scale immigration and rapid digitalization. Collectively, we have been slow to respond. In my view, the sector's persistent whiteness is blinding, its social media illiteracy deafening, and its increasingly apolitical stance numbing.

To finally rebuild a Dutch development system fit for this century, we need a strategy composed of three 3Ds:

- **Democracy** — reframe development as part of the global fight for freedom and democratic values. Especially since the Dutch have become so individualized, they cherish their freedom of choice, and could be mobilized to defend this, if we organize it differently.
- **Diasporas** — embrace migrant communities—in all diversity—as co-creators of development policy, finance and leadership.
- **Digital** — build innovative, horizontal communication strategies that connect with younger generations where they are.

Only by adapting to these social transformations can the Netherlands sustain a meaningful, broad-based commitment to global solidarity in the decades ahead. Let me expand.

5.1 Individualization and misguided narrative

Individualization — both a cause and effect of digitalization — has reshaped Dutch society. Politicians have often assumed that individualization means that voters become more self-interested, leading to aid policies focused on returns for the Netherlands, such as commercial gain or migration control. This is a misconception and has led to a misguided narrative. Even in a highly individualized society, people can be mobilized for collective causes, as the

1 I now single out China, because its interference in the Netherlands is best documented, but the governments of countries such as Iran, Rwanda and Eritrea also affect the democratic aspirations of Dutch citizens (AIVD & NCTV, 2024).

climate marches and 'Red Line' demonstrations have shown. In the 1960s and 1970s, the fight against hunger united the Dutch — whether remembered from the wartime Hunger Winter or seen on television. Today, finding such unifying themes is harder. Climate change and migration control divide political camps, but defending democracy and freedom — values cherished across the spectrum—could become a rallying point. With authoritarianism on the rise worldwide, the fight for democracy abroad is also a fight for preserving freedoms at home. So a new narrative is needed, and this should focus on the freedom to live your life as you wish to live it (which was the original definition of development anyway (Sen, 2000)). It is an injustice if people can't express their views: the highly individualized Dutch get that and could be mobilized for that. There has been a lot of talk about combining the fields of human rights and development and now it is time to turn this talk into action (AIV, 2019). Concretely this could mean the following: our diplomats here in the room will need to fight that in the next version of the sustainable development goals, there are goals for academic freedom, free & fair elections, protection of journalists, freedom of assembly. Whereas autocracies are already preparing to further technocratize the post 2030 agenda, we need to gear up and lobby and negotiate for the inclusion of political rights and civil liberties in this agenda, also for scholars.

5.2 Migration and the diaspora gap

In the early 1970s, when Dutch development aid took shape, the Netherlands was still overwhelmingly white. Beyond communities of Indonesian heritage and the first guest workers, there were few residents with a non-Western background. Today the change is dramatic: in The Hague, most residents are migrants, which means that they themselves, or one of their parents, are born outside the Netherlands. Most migrants are from non-Western countries, and similar patterns are found in other major cities. A government scenario analysis projects that by 2050, the population will reach 19–20 million, with almost 40% having a migration background—more than 7 million people—if a more stringent immigration policy will be followed. Otherwise, the number of migrants will be higher (Staatscommissie Demografische Ontwikkelingen 2050, 2024, p. 107).²

2 The diversity between migrant communities is substantial: there are highly skilled knowledge workers, political asylum seekers, and manual laborers. Yet support for development aid appears not per definition high in those groups. For instance, voters of DENK (a party popular with Muslim-Migrant communities) shows similar attitudes as voters of FvD, a reactionary right-wing party (Kinsbergen et al., 2025, p. 13).

This demographic transformation should be a strength: a vast reservoir of connections, languages, and cultural insights. Instead, diaspora communities are largely absent from the formal development sector, both in leadership, finance and in policy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs once had a dedicated diaspora policy (2005–2012), but has abolished this.³ In the Dutch system, leadership remains overwhelmingly white: among the 14 leading humanitarian agencies in the Dutch Relief Alliance, not one is headed by a person of color (BIPOC); among Partos' 106 members, only seven have BIPOC leadership. Recasting a Dutch development system means embracing the diaspora as co-architects, not as outsiders to be 'consulted' occasionally.

Involving the diasporas (I deliberately use the plural version) isn't about asking them to join our traditional development clubs but supporting them to play their part. Let me give an example: the Dutch pride themselves on being financial innovators, but our large development banks—such as FMO—and private sector organizations—such as Invest International—are until now tapping insufficiently into the potential of the diasporas. When it comes to diaspora bonds, diaspora finance or diaspora business support, Dutch innovations are virtually absent.

5.3 Digitalization and generational disconnect

When the Dutch development regime was built, pillarized mass media amplified shared messages of solidarity. Now, the Netherlands has one of Europe's most advanced digital infrastructures, with near-universal broadband and internet use. This has transformed how people access information, form opinions, and construct identity. Social media and messaging platforms enable highly personalized media diets, eroding the collective narratives that once bound citizens together.

In the 1960s and 1970s, young people were a driving force for development causes, much as they have recently been for climate activism. But today, they are largely absent from the Dutch development system. On TikTok, for instance, Dutch adolescents spend almost an hour daily, checking the app nearly 20 times—yet most Dutch development NGOs have negligible

3 This policy should in theory have empowered these organizations. In practice, priorities rarely aligned: many diaspora groups preferred sending tangible goods to home communities, while policymakers pushed for broader "capacity building" beyond specific communities. Frustrations mounted, particularly when diaspora groups were asked to help implement the government's migrant-return agenda, which they refused. Trust broke down diaspora organizations are no longer part of the formal development regime (Nijenhuis, 2020).

presence or engagement there. The median follower count of the sector's top 10 TikTok accounts is 1,600—which is less than the top 10 hairdressers in The Hague, despite NGOs having entire communications departments. Hairdresser Jamaica Cuts at the Leemansplein has more followers than Oxfam Novib, Amnesty, Greenpeace and Stichting Vluchteling combined.

This is not about 'being on TikTok' for its own sake; it is about building serious, 21st-century digital engagement strategies that recognize communication has shifted from vertical, expert-to-public channels to horizontal, peer-to-peer networks. Without this shift, international solidarity risks fading into irrelevance. What strikes me is that the industry association of the development sector has traditionally insufficiently been a force of change in this regard. Let's ensure that the industry association also has a youth wing, which can stimulate the much-needed rejuvenation of the sector.

You all have a role to play in developing this new narrative, becoming representative of the new composition of the Dutch society, and mastering the communication tools of the 21st century. If you take up this challenge we can recreate the energy, the vibe and buzz that propelled Dutch commitment to development in the 1960s and 1970s.

6 Birthday wishes for the ISS

Today marks the 73rd anniversary of the ISS, a good moment to share my birthday wishes. The ISS is at a critical juncture, redefining its identity amidst local and global shifts. It has a crucial role in reinventing the Dutch development system—for if it doesn't, it risks going down with it. With its assets and history, the ISS can again play a pivotal role.

First, I wish the ISS would embrace its Dutch roots. Too often the ISS stood with its back to The Hague—I am committed, as network chair, to help change that: strengthen ties with Dutch actors and the public, and research global interconnectedness while stimulating engagement. Research should focus on where the Global North and South meet, grounded in equitable partnerships. We already produce top-level impact research on development finance in traditional aid fields like health; I'd like to see this extended to global challenges, such as measuring more the impact of finance and diplomacy for democracy. Changing development finance objectives means adapting our impact metrics.

Second, I wish development studies as a whole would focus more on societal impact. Sometimes, there appears to be a contest on who can use most difficult words, like epistemic-this and ontological-that, than a focus on making societal impact through research, in our discipline. I see this occasionally even in *Development & Change*, our academic journal that I truly appreciate. We need more co-created, yet critical, research with policymakers, activists, and practitioners, published in accessible formats. The Humanitarian Studies Centre here is a great example.

Lastly, I wish ISS and its scholars were more active in defending academic freedom worldwide. Social science and humanities researchers face repression globally. The Scholars at Risk network provides sanctuary and assistance to more than 300 threatened scholars annually. While the ISS has housed scholars at risk, more is possible, as neither the ISS nor Erasmus are a member. Institutions and academics alike can help, e.g by providing a platform for scholars-at-risk and leveraging our partnerships to stimulate academic freedom. We should not only study autocratisation but actively resist it.

Let me end where I began: with the international solidarity I experienced growing up in the Netherlands. I hope this address inspires you to play your part in reinventing it. Let's discuss over drinks tonight and get to work tomorrow!

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