

# Development co-operation : "Development has nothing to do with it"

Autor(en): **Zimmerli, Martin / Imfeld, AI / Chisholm, N.**

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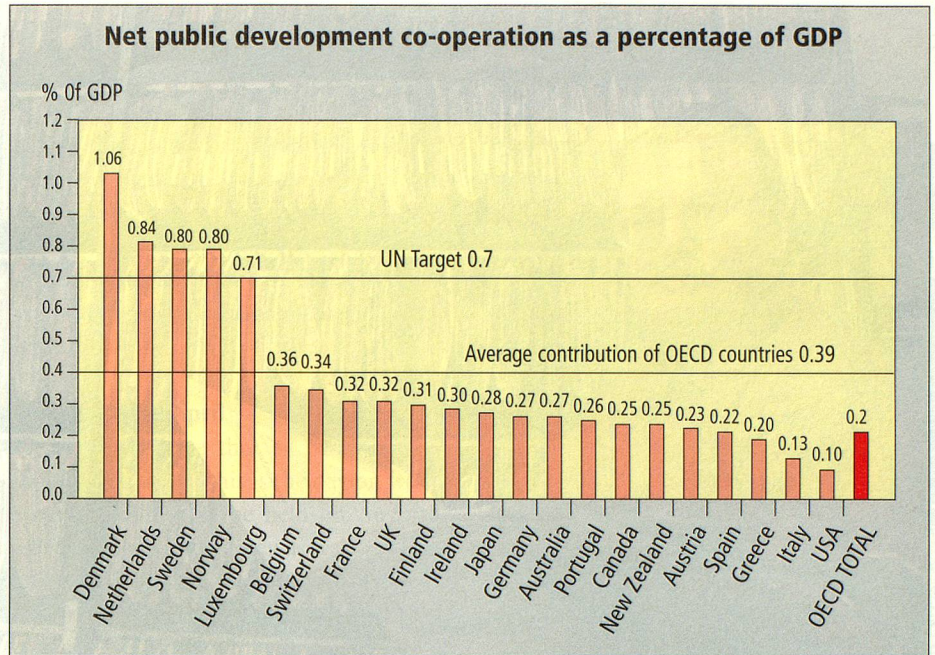
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technical co-operation with Eastern Europe is concentrated on six Balkan states and the former Soviet Union.

Public development co-operation cannot be discussed without mention of economic and trade-related measures such as mixed credits, assistance with the balance of payments, trade promotion, the assurance of basic products, and strategies to reduce the debt of the world's highly indebted poor countries (HIPCs).

**Achievements**

Development co-operation has experienced many changes in the the past 40 years. Gone are the days when infrastructure projects were financed and paternalistic donors provided development aid. "Nowadays donors support the partners in their development work. They fit in with their goals and methods and no longer force them to see things from their point of view," emphasises Walter Fust, SDC Director, in the recent September issue of the SDC newsletter "Eine Welt" ("One World"). What does he believe has been achieved? "No-one can say exactly



what development co-operation has achieved, because many of its elements are unquantifiable. In terms of education, health and access to drinking water, progress has been made," remarks Walter Fust, but he also points out the failures: "The group of least developed countries has grown, and

this is an unacceptable situation. We must not believe that co-operation alone will change the world and correct all inequalities."

Translated from the German by N. Chisholm

# "Development has nothing to do with it"

**INTERVIEW: MARTIN ZIMMERLI**

*Al Imfeld is a critic of Switzerland's official development co-operation work. In Switzerland the controversial development expert repeatedly sparks off heated discussion.*

Switzerland is fond of boasting of its long humanitarian tradition. Can we still believe in this?

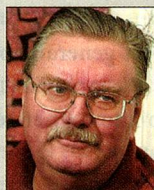
No, but we never could. Those are dangerous words - political slang.

But you must credit our country with some good offices in this area.

Yes. In fact, Switzerland played an important role in the past. But that is based on two things: firstly, the ICRC and its mediating role in conflict situations, and secondly the missionary movement; there is hardly a country in Africa where Swiss missionaries have not left their mark. Thanks to both these institutions, the ICRC and the mis-

sionary movement, Switzerland still has a very good reputation in Africa."

... But you don't think it deserves this? Look: Even the missionaries did not provide assistance for purely selfless reasons. They tried to convince Africans that - to put it bluntly - our faith was better than theirs →



Viewed by many as an enfant terrible: Al Imfeld.

Al Imfeld (67) has studied on four continents (in Switzerland, Italy, Japan, Kenya, the USA and the Philippines). His studies ranged from Catholic and Protestant theology (ordained in 1960), journalism and development sociology, to tropical agriculture. He has taught in Zimbabwe, Malawi, Tanzania, Nairobi, Zurich, Lucerne and Berne and given lectures in Europe and Africa. He is the author of 40 books, including four volumes of poetry. He co-founded the movement "For an open church", set up the 3rd World information service (i3w) in Berne, and founded "Dialogue Africa" and the Society for the Promotion of African, Asian and Latin American Literatures.

Imagopress



Swiss religious scientist Al Imfeld, Africa expert and Brother of the Immensee Missionary Society.

and naturally hoped that the Africans would one day convert. People lend assistance in the expectation of receiving something in return at some point in time. This aspect of anticipation of returns is often overlooked nowadays.

**So what would be the right approach?**

The criterion for successful development co-operation is respect. Respect for the culture and the history of countries. We must be able to understand the people with whom we are co-operating. And if we do this, we will realise that African people cannot plan in the same way as we do.

**But they are no less able!**

It's a question of culture, not ability. For instance, in the Bantu language there is no future tense. There is only the concept of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, so a five or ten year plan is just a scrap of paper. The past and hence history are ignored.

**In what way?**

For forty years I have been working on an agrarian history of Africa because I want to give Africans an identity and a past. For decades people tried to persuade them that they had no history. They were merely dismissed as hunters and gatherers: a terrible colonial phrase. Anyone who studies history knows that people have settled at different times and grown crops. But this had to be

denied in order to convince Africans that they had no right to land.

**But hunters and gatherers have existed in countries other than Africa, too...**

... no, it's the same all over again. Agrarian history must be radically re-written - that includes our own. And another thing: If we continue to praise the large African family, we must also accept that the members of such a family are obliged to hand over to their relatives some of the money they received - including money donated by relief agencies.

**You talk of respect for other cultures. How can we get to know other cultures better?**

Our diplomats must be educated in a completely different way. They cannot merely jet around the world and assume they can learn about cultures as they go along. A diplomat should be a link between the host country and his home country - he must promote mutual cultural understanding.

**Understanding and respect generally presuppose a reciprocity: We are used to planning and wanting to know where our donations are being spent.**

Of course, but it is extremely difficult for Africans to get to know Switzerland and our culture. One example: We can study Africa tomorrow and familiarise ourselves with the culture there. But if I want to come to Switzerland with an African, I have to post a

CHF 12,000 bond, even if the African in question is a Nobel laureate. That is downright racism.

**What implications does this have for our development co-operation?**

We must make it clear to recipients that donors also merit respect. If this is not the case, then my response is radical: we give them nothing. Our mentality has influenced people to the extent that they let their children die and be photographed dying because they know that this breaks our hearts and that donations will flood in from Europe.


**Are you serious?**

Absolutely, although ten years ago I wouldn't have believed it. But nowadays we must not allow ourselves to be blackmailed.

**So where do you see room for improvement in Swiss development aid work?**

Switzerland must substantially expand its role as a mediator in conflict situations.

**How substantially?**

It must devote 50 percent of its resources to this effort. A peace research institute like the one in Oslo would be good for Switzerland. That would be fabulous, because only if peace reigns in a country can we provide effective material assistance. 

Translated from the German by N. Chisholm