INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION IN OECD COUNTRIES: PUBLIC DEBATE, PUBLIC SUPPORT AND PUBLIC OPINION
Informal Experts Meeting organised by the OECD Development Centre in co-operation with the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency (SIDA) and Ireland Aid

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SUMMARY

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I. Objectives and Participation

1. An OECD Development Centre Informal Experts Meeting, “International Development Co-operation in OECD Countries: Public Debate, Public Support and Public Opinion” was held in Dublin on 25 and 26 October 2001, with the co-operation and financial support of the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency (SIDA) and Ireland Aid. It was organised following a proposal by the OECD Development Assistance Committee’s (DAC) Informal Network of Heads of Information of Official Aid Agencies in April 2001.

2. The objectives of the meeting were to: (i) take stock of current levels of public support for, and public opinion about, international development issues in OECD countries; and (ii) examine best practices in OECD countries regarding how to educate the public on development generally and development co-operation specifically. The meeting generated keen interest in the international development community, with strong participation from governments, international organisations and civil society, notably, the Development Education Association, the Development Education Council of Japan, 80:20 Educating and Acting for a Better World, Amnesty International, Max Havelaar, Oxfam, One-World International, and Jubilee 2000 (now known as Jubilee Plus).

II. Public Opinion Trends

3. The analyses of recent trends in public opinion in OECD countries showed that not only does public support remain high but that on the whole it has not declined in the past decade. Yet, public support was seen as often mis-informed and based on exaggerated perceptions of the size of aid budgets, or weak understanding of development co-operation. What was seen as more problematic was that, despite the steady public support for aid, official aid flows have declined significantly in the majority of DAC Member countries since the early 1990s.

4. Discussions revealed inconsistencies in the state of knowledge about the relationship between public opinion, development co-operation policy and aid commitments in DAC countries. Participants called for more research and comparable data across OECD countries to gain a more accurate picture of trends in public opinion. There was broad support for a proposal to develop a common methodology for surveying public attitudes – a sort of OECD barometer of public attitudes – as well as to evaluate and examine the effectiveness of information and development education activities among DAC Members. The issue of data gathering and monitoring was seen as important enough to be suggested as the topic for the next meeting of the Informal Network of DAC Heads of Information in 2002.

III. Best Practices

5. Focusing next on “best practices” in raising public awareness about development issues, case studies of successful campaigns for human rights, cancel-the-debt and general development education were presented by NGOs and the Swiss Development Co-operation Agency.

6. The case studies pointed to the importance of, inter alia, (i) the effectiveness of single-issue campaigns in raising public awareness: (ii) using a justice rather than charity message when building support; (iii) strong leadership in communicating messages; and (iv) providing a means for the public to act on their development knowledge. Discussions indicated that countries which have experienced an increase in public support for development assistance appeared to share the following characteristics: there is a stated objective of poverty reduction; awareness about international problems and of the relevance of these problems to personal and national well-being and security; and increased efforts in communication and development education. It was acknowledged that decision-makers themselves should be better informed about development, that the private sector should be included in development education activities, and that the media, including those based on the internet, should be better targeted.

7. A synthesis of the meeting’s proceedings will be published as a Development Centre Policy Brief. The proceedings will also be used to update in 2002 the Centre’s 1998 publication, Public Attitudes and International Development Co-operation.