ADVISORY LETTER

THE FUTURE OF ODA

No. 29, November 2016

ADVISORY COUNCIL ON INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
ADVIESRAAD INTERNATIONALE VRAAGSTUKKEN

AIV

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Introduction

In recent decades the Netherlands has committed itself nationally and internationally to the international standard of spending 0.7% of its Gross National Income (GNI) as official development assistance (ODA). For years the country was true to its word and met this target.

Now, however, the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) has noticed a worrying trend. While the government has adopted the 0.7% standard in the budget, it will be unable to meet it in the years ahead unless it reconsiders its decisions. Estimates in the 2017 Homogeneous Budget for International Cooperation (HGIS)[1] indicate that under the current coalition agreement the ODA budget will decline to 0.56% of GNI by 2017 and to 0.44% by 2020.[2]

The decline in the ODA budget is at odds with the growing importance of international cooperation. Extreme poverty is still an acute problem in many countries. A large proportion of the population in Africa has had little if any benefit from economic growth. Weak state intervention, internal conflicts, religious agitation and terrorist groups are threatening stability inside and outside the continent.

The causes of migration to the Netherlands and to Europe as a whole – such as the war in Syria – must be systematically addressed. Substantial investments need to be made to give refugees an economic and social future in their home regions. The quality of regional reception must be such that it removes the incentive to travel onward.

At the same time, considerable support must be given to implement the climate agreement, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the associated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). On signing the climate agreement in Paris, the Netherlands agreed to provide 'new and additional' funds to achieve the climate goals.

It is well known that substantial investments are needed to achieve the SDGs, and they certainly cannot be financed from private sources alone. The Netherlands has been one of the driving forces behind the 2030 Agenda.

Concerns have frequently been expressed about the decline in the ODA budget, particularly the part of it that can be spent in developing countries themselves to strengthen security

1 The HGIS memorandum is submitted to the States General every year on the third Tuesday in September (Budget Day). It summarises all expenditure incurred by the ministries on the implementation of Dutch foreign policy, with a distinction being made between official development assistance (ODA) and other foreign policy expenditure (non-ODA). Presenting the two types of expenditure together increases transparency and thus contributes to an integrated and coherent foreign policy. The States General are informed of actual expenditure on the third Wednesday in May each year (Accountability Day).

2 HGIS memorandum for 2017, 2016-2017 session, 34 551, no. 2, 20 September 2016.

and the rule of law and to implement the climate agreement and the SDGs.[3] A recent study by I&O Research found that – in contrast to 2010 – a majority of the Dutch electorate were in favour of increasing the Netherlands' contribution to international peace missions and were opposed to continuing to cut development cooperation expenditure.[4]

The 2017 HGIS memorandum reveals that additional funds will no longer be released to make up for the structural decline in the ODA budget in the years ahead, thus making the reduction permanent. In view of this the AIV would strongly urge that the international cooperation budget be reconsidered and that the ODA budget be placed in a new multiannual perspective.

This advisory letter was prepared by J.N.M. Richelle (Development Cooperation Committee, COS), Professor M.E.H. van Reisen (AIV), Professor J. Gupta (AIV), and Ms E.N. van der Steenhoven (COS). P. de Keizer and Ms A.R. Alblas (trainee) served as the secretariat.

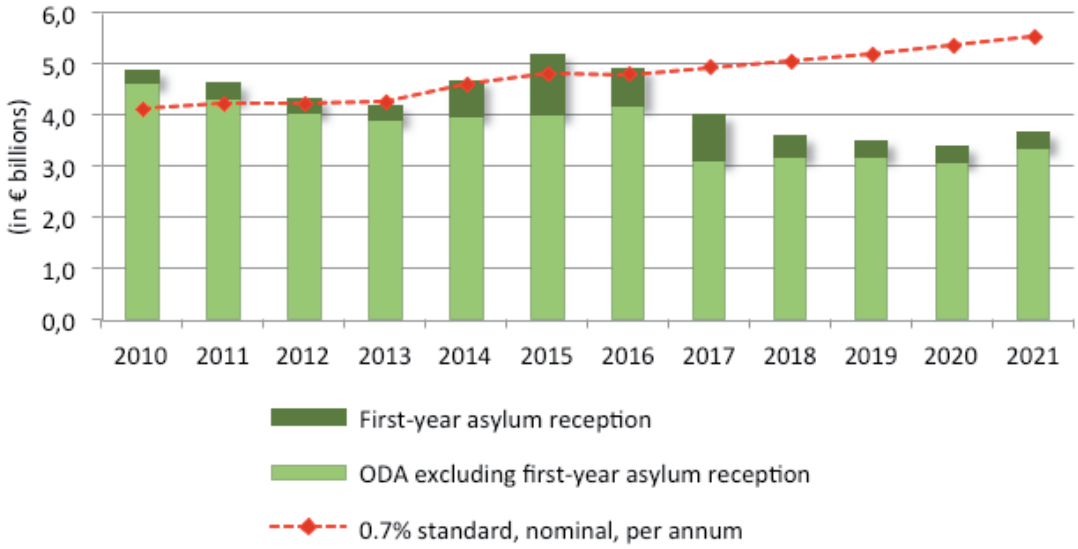
3 See, for example: open letter to the House of Representatives, 'ODA en Asielkosten' ('ODA and Asylum Costs') by Dutch civil society organisations, June 2016; questions and answers as part of the 2015-2016 budget debate, November 2015; and the debate with members of the Senate's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Development Cooperation Committee, December 2015.

4 Political survey, I&O Research, 17 September 2016. See: <http://www.ioresearch.nl/Portals/0/I%260%20Research%20politieke%20peiling%20september%202016%20v3.pdf>.

I ODA budget

Until the beginning of this decade, the Netherlands spent 0.8% of its GNI as development assistance each year. In 2010 the ODA budget was still equal to 0.8% of GNI; in the years since it has fluctuated between 0.64% and 0.75%. The HGIS memorandum for 2017 reveals that this downward trend will continue in the years ahead unless policy is changed. The decline is the outcome of three factors:

- Spending cuts: A reduction in the annual ODA budget was agreed in the coalition agreement. Under the Rutte/Verhagen government ODA was cut in steps from the original 0.8% of GNI to 0.75% in 2011 and 0.7% as from 2012. Additional cuts were made in the Rutte/Asscher coalition agreement.[5] During the first three years the ODA budget was cut by €750 million, and it will be reduced by a further €1 billion per annum as from 2017. As the chart below shows, the 0.7% standard will effectively be abandoned as from 2017.



Source: 'Aandachtspunten bij ontwerpbegroting 2017' ('Concerns about the 2017 Draft Budget'), Netherlands Court of Audit, 16004310, 7 October 2016; HGIS memorandum for 2017, Annexe 2A; and answers by the Minister of Foreign Affairs to questions from the Permanent Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs, 28 October 2016.

- Allocation of costs for the first-year reception of refugees and asylum seekers: Not only will the principle of spending at least 0.7% of GNI as ODA be abandoned, a substantial proportion of the costs incurred in the Netherlands for the first-year reception of refugees and asylum seekers from ODA-eligible countries will be charged to the reduced ODA budget. In 2015, first-year reception costs totalled €1,186 million, equal to 25% of the ODA budget (in 2010 they totalled €253 million, or 5% of the

5 'Monitoring Development Cooperation Policy', Netherlands Court of Audit (2012).

ODA budget). Other OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries also charge such reception costs to their ODA budgets, but not to the same extent as the Netherlands (on average, 9% in OECD DAC countries versus 23% in the Netherlands in 2015.[6] To cover the costs, multiannual budget transfers have been made, with the government bringing forward expected GNI growth in 2016-2021 (€1.2 billion in total) and transferring €375 million to the ODA budget for 2014 and €350 million to that for 2015. As the Netherlands Court of Audit has observed, the GNI growth transferred in this manner cannot be used to implement new programmes or to offset the impact of lower GNI.[7]

- The cost of emergency aid and regional reception of refugees: Expenditure on emergency aid and regional reception nearly doubled between 2013 and 2016. These costs, too, are in principle charged to the ODA budget. The humanitarian aid budget is accordingly being temporarily supplemented with non-structural funds to set up a new emergency aid fund (€750 million in total for 2014-2017) and a one-off allocation for regional reception (€260 million in 2016).

The coalition agreement and the above developments will reduce the remaining ODA share of the budget (i.e. after deducting first-year reception costs incurred in the Netherlands and allowing for fixed and compulsory expenditure such as contributions to the EU, the World Bank and regional banks) from €3.8 billion in 2010 to approximately €2 billion in 2020. There will therefore be considerably less money available for policy priorities in the developing countries themselves, for peace and security initiatives and for protecting international public goods.

6 See the OECD DAC report on in-donor country refugee costs, April 2016. See: <https://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/RefugeeCostsMethodologicalNote.pdf>.

7 Letter from the Netherlands Court of Audit to the President of the House of Representatives: 'Aandachtspunten bij de ontwerpbegroting 2017 (hoofdstuk V) van het ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken en (hoofdstuk XVII) van de minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking' ('Concerns about the 2017 Draft Budgets of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Chapter V) and of the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation's (Chapter XVII)'), 7 October 2016.

II Considerations

The AIV would draw the government's attention to the following points.

- Abandoning the 0.7% standard would not be without consequences. The first consideration is international credibility: the Netherlands has committed itself at many global conferences[8] to spending at least 0.7% of GNI as ODA, on top of the additional funds it has pledged for climate agreements. Furthermore, the Netherlands has undertaken to press for integrated international cooperation in the fields of climate change and energy, water, agriculture and food, biodiversity and raw materials. New and additional funding will also be needed for these undertakings.[9]

- A high-level contribution should be made to the international efforts planned for the coming years to tackle such complex issues as climate change and sustainable development and promote the closer cooperation necessary to flesh out policy and make results quantifiable. This ambition entails a willingness to adhere to international agreements on standards. By budgeting for less than the 0.7% standard and further reducing that part of the ODA budget available for use in developing countries, the Netherlands will be signalling that it no longer means to play a role in the joint management and political control of programmes that are important to it.

- With regard to management, the full allocation of first-year reception costs makes heavy demands on the remainder of the ODA budget and hinders the proper implementation of good development policy. The influx of refugees is difficult to predict, as it is largely the result of geopolitical events such as the war in Syria and agreements on the regional reception of refugees (such as the Turkey deal and the EU's new migration pact). The budgeting system currently in use creates administrative and political problems because fluctuations and the unpredictability of expenditure mean it is uncertain what funds can be earmarked each year for policy.[10]

- Furthermore, it will be increasingly difficult to transfer cash balances in the years ahead as the resources used in the past begin to run out. Even more importantly, using multiannual transfers to absorb one-off setbacks is irresponsible. They create

8 The EU Foreign Affairs (Development) Council of 26 May 2015, for example, reaffirmed 'its collective commitment to achieve the 0.7% ODA/GNI target within the time frame of the post-2015 agenda. Member States which joined the EU before 2002 reaffirm their commitment to achieve the 0.7% ODA/GNI target, taking into consideration budgetary circumstances, whilst those which have achieved that target commit themselves to remain at or above that target; Member States which joined the EU after 2002 strive to increase their ODA/GNI to 0.33%.' Council of the European Union, 26 May 2015, 9241/15.

9 Referring to the Dutch contribution to the worldwide ecological footprint, the AIV has noted that in the field of environmental cooperation alone, a Dutch contribution of €3 billion per annum would be reasonable (see advisory report no. 84, 'New Paths to International Environmental Cooperation', The Hague, March 2013).

10 See the open letter on 'ODA and Asylum Costs', op.cit.

hostages to the future.[11] If GNI growth is below expectations, more spending cuts will be necessary and the Netherlands may have to renege on its multiannual ODA commitments, which would undermine its standing as a reliable international partner.

11 Due to these transfers, the ODA budget for the coming years includes several very substantial, as yet unspecified spending cuts (see HGIS memorandum 2017, Annexe 2A, Article XVII 0.5.04).

III Conclusions

In the AIV's opinion, the importance of international cooperation will only increase in a globalised world. Spurred on by the climate agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and with a view to the increased instability in a broad arc around Europe and the resulting influx of refugees and migrants, international cooperation will undoubtedly take on different characteristics from traditional development cooperation. This area, like many areas of society, is in transition. A great deal needs to be done, particularly to address the foreseeable ecological causes of conflict and migration.

Whatever the details, the AIV believes there will still be a need for a substantial budget to help eradicate global poverty, remove the causes of migration, provide reception in the region for refugees and enable implementation of the Paris climate agreement and the international 2030 Agenda.

Of course, the AIV understands that the budget has temporarily had to be adjusted in response to exceptional circumstances. But if the adjustment becomes permanent – and thus escalates into a seriously aberrant course – it should be placed on the political agenda and be subject to open public debate and political decision-making. The AIV would urge that decision-making on the ODA budget be placed in a proper framework and given a clear direction that clarifies the role that the Netherlands seeks to continue playing in development cooperation, not only for politicians but also for civil society organisations, the business community and the diplomatic service.

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