

International peacemaker

Norway is a generous donor and enjoys high visibility as a peace broker. Public support is high, despite criticism from some quarters. It now wants to rejuvenate the UN and work more closely with the EU.



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Norway reached its goal of spending 1% of gross national income on official development assistance in 2009. Opposition parties and others criticize key elements

of the government's foreign policy but the outcome of the parliamentary elections in September 2009 points to a steady course for the next four years: further increases in Norway's aid budget and a continuation of the government's international agenda.

Norway has a very strong economy and has been less affected by the global economic crisis than most comparable countries. The government has been able to maintain a level of international assistance and retain Norway's position as one of the world's top donors in relative terms. In real terms, the situation is even more striking: with the national income growing rapidly, fuelled by high oil prices, Norway was able to double its international assistance between 1999 and 2008.

As Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg's centre-left coalition embarks on a second four-year term, its priorities have been set. New white papers on foreign policy, development assistance and humanitarian aid promise a continued focus on and further integration between these policy sectors.

According to the government, Norway's foreign policy interests in an increasingly interconnected world 'can no longer be limited to narrow self-interest'. An international legal order and multilateral regimes are seen as 'vital' to Norway; addressing climate change and violent conflict are identified as

summary

- A strong economy enabled Norway to double international assistance between 1999 and 2008.
- Norway has been involved as a mediator in several international conflicts since the early 1990s.
- Critics claim Norway has achieved little in its roles as a generous donor and international peacemaker.

focal points in the fight against poverty and it is argued that globalization 'is increasingly turning peacebuilding, international organization and human rights into *realpolitik*'.

Norway has spent some 250 billion kroner (€30 billion) on international development assistance since the 1950s. The target of 1% of gross national income was set in 2005 by the new coalition (Labour, Socialist Left and Centre parties). The government reached this target in the 2009 budget, when the allocations for long-term cooperation, humanitarian aid, peacebuilding and cooperation in research and business were increased to €3.12 billion.

In 2008, 44% of Norway's total aid was bilateral, 24% multilateral and 27% multi-bilateral with 5% going to administration costs. In all, 110 countries received bilateral aid from Norway. Top of the list was Afghanistan (€88 million), followed by Tanzania, Sudan, the Palestinian Authority-administered territories, Mozambique, Uganda, Zambia, Malawi, Nepal and Serbia.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) manages long-term state-to-state cooperation, as well as Norway's multilateral assistance and humanitarian aid. The MFA includes the Ministry of the Environment and International Development: in 2007, the International Development Minister, Erik Solheim, also took responsibility for the Ministry of the Environment, since when environmental issues have been pushed up the aid agenda.

By **Sven Gunnar Simonsen**, an independent analyst and international reporter, and a former researcher at the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo, Norway.



Jan Egeland, former UN special envoy, at a conference in Oslo, Norway, May 2009.

as a partner in development. Although not a member, Norway is closely integrated with the EU. A 2009 white paper on international assistance states the government will cooperate more closely on development issues. ¹⁶

For the MFA, Norway's main development policy objectives are to 'fight poverty and bring about social justice' and to focus on 'areas where Norway can make the greatest contribution'. In a 2009 white paper on foreign policy, the country's strengths are explicitly linked to the character of Norwegian society, described as 'a resource reservoir and tool for Norwegian foreign policy'. In some areas, such as human rights and women and gender equality, Norway is itself a top performer. Other areas reflect its broader international profile: the environment, peacebuilding, human rights, humanitarian assistance and good governance.

International assistance is also provided to sectors where Norway has particular technical competence. Its first development initiative, for example, was a fisheries project in Kerala, India. Today, assistance for technology transfer and resource-related governance focus on oil, gas and clean energy sources, primarily channelled through the Norad programme, Oil for Development (OfD), and the smaller, Clean Energy for Development. OfD operates in more than 25 countries. In recent years, Norway has, for example, helped draft Timor-Leste's petroleum law which emulates legislation governing Norway's own 'Oil Fund'. OfD's expenditures in 2009 were expected to reach €30 million, with Mozambique, Sudan and Timor-Leste the biggest recipients.

Norway enjoys a high international profile as a generous donor and as a peacemaker. The country also commands respect for its financial strength. By early 2009, Norway's Government Pension Fund – Global or simply the 'Oil Fund', owned 1% of the world's stock markets, making it the second-biggest sovereign wealth fund. Under finance minister Kristin Halvorsen, of the Socialist Left Party, the fund has taken an increasingly activist role. Ethical guidelines bar it from making investments that may contribute, for example, to human rights violations, corruption or environmental damage.

Norway's active role as a peace mediator and facilitator is often explained by reference to particular traits of Norway itself. In 1988, a young scholar and activist, Jan Egeland, published a thesis that would become a manifesto of sorts for Norway's future role as a peacemaker. Egeland argued that Norway was particularly well suited to play such a role – a small country with no colonial past and no great power ambitions. A couple of years later, Egeland was hired as a deputy minister of foreign affairs and got, in his own words, the opportunity 'to create the empirical material that was missing in the thesis'. Behind the scenes, Egeland was a key player in the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinians. He also played an important role in the peace

Norad, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, is the main public implementing organization besides the MFA. As a directorate within the MFA, Norad's role is to ensure that foreign aid is effective and that quality control and evaluation processes are in place. It provides finance to NGOs and carries out its own research and development projects. A substantial part of bilateral aid is channelled through NGOs. The five largest – Norwegian Church Aid, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the Norwegian Red Cross, Norwegian People's Aid and Save the Children Norway – received a total of €237.5 million in 2008.

Policy priorities

The cornerstones of Norway's development and foreign policy are the scale of its international assistance and its role as a mediator in international peace processes.

Norwegian priorities reflect changes in the global landscape (such as armed conflict, migration and climate change) as well as the ideological profile of current and recent governments. The underlying justification for aid has shifted to some extent, from a conservative concept of moral obligation to a social democratic one of international solidarity.

Norway is the world's seventh largest donor to the UN system (2007). The government is eager to revitalize the UN now that the George W. Bush administration has left office. The European Union features less prominently than the UN



Norway's role as peacemaker is not always appreciated. Protesters in Colombo, Sri Lanka, April 2006.

process that led to the 1996 peace accords and ended Guatemala's 36-year civil conflict.

Norway has since been involved in peace processes in Sri Lanka, Sudan, the Middle East, Colombia, the Philippines, Timor-Leste, Haiti, Burundi, Eritrea, Mali and Cyprus. In several cases, the government has worked with Norwegian NGOs already present 'on the ground'. The government's readiness to cooperate with NGOs in foreign policy is the key aspect of what is often called 'the Norwegian model'.

International assistance also follows Norway's engagement in peace processes. Sudan, the Palestinian Authority-administered territories and Sri Lanka were major recipients from 2005 to 2008. The promise of aid has made concessions more palatable in negotiations and funding has sought to ensure that an agreed peace will last.

The role as peacemaker is not without its disappointments. Back home the most controversial topic is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Successive governments have prided themselves on their balanced relationship of trust with leaders on both sides of the conflict. But with the Israelis and Palestinians both becoming more radicalized since the 1993 Oslo Accords, this 'balance' has become more complicated.

Israeli authorities, in particular, have criticized Norway and at home the government has come under repeated fire from the pro-Israel Progress Party and the Christian People's Party.

Norway's involvement with the conflict in Sri Lanka gradually became unpopular with both parties. Erik Solheim's readiness to talk with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) angered nationalists and the Sri Lankan government; later in 2009, as the LTTE was approaching its final defeat, Solheim alienated the Tamils by encouraging the LTTE to lay down their arms.

In recent years, a major factor affecting assistance has been the deployment of the Norwegian army. Humanitarian and development aid have followed Norwegian forces into Bosnia, Kosovo and, above all, Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, the Norwegian government has encouraged its main Norwegian NGO partners to concentrate their work in Maymana in the northern province of Faryab, where Norway runs an International Security Assistance Force provincial reconstruction team. Afghanistan is today the largest single recipient of bilateral aid from Norway. As such, it may also be said to constitute a major challenge in terms of the politicization of aid. Whereas it is difficult to question the needs of the country, it is clear that aid here is part of a package aimed at 'winning hearts and minds'.

Questioning Norwegian aid

A common claim by sceptics in Norway, as in other countries, is that large sums are lost to corruption and bureaucracy and that the aid does little, if anything, to reduce poverty in developing countries. Controversies specific to Norway concern the close ties between the MFA, development and humanitarian NGOs and academia. Critics also challenge the country's role as peacemaker, its rationale and success rate.

Foreign policy priorities and practice have traditionally been consensual in Norway. However, discussion concerning Norway's international role and engagement has changed significantly over the last decade or so. To a large extent, this is due to the rise of the Progress Party, Europe's most enduring right-wing populist party. Declaring 'traditional assistance' to be ineffectual, and comparing its costs to the unmet needs of Norway's own sick and elderly, the party has called for drastic cuts in development assistance. Norway's second-largest party, the Progress Party is also sceptical of Norway's role as a peacemaker.

The Conservative Party – the largest on the right before the rise of the Progress Party – on the other hand, has overseen a steady increase in international assistance while in government. In the 2009 election campaign, the party criticized the Labour-led government for turning the 1% target into a 'mantra' and caring less about how the money was actually spent; cuts, however, were not the main point.

In the 1990s, there was also significant scepticism in the Conservative Party over Norway's emerging role as an international peacemaker. However, the 2001-2005 centre-right coalition government, led by Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik of the Christian People's Party, continued on its predecessor's diplomatic course. It was during



The Norwegian model: Erik Solheim, development minister, during Sri Lankan peace talks, October 2006.

Bondevik's government, for instance, that Norway's peacemaking efforts in Sri Lanka began – led, incidentally, by Erik Solheim of the Socialist Left Party.

In the September 2009 election campaign, disagreement over foreign and development policy weakened the prospects for a coalition between the Conservative, the Progress and Christian People's Parties. The disagreement between the last two on international aid issues appeared insurmountable, even though the Progress Party softened its 'cut-aid-to-the-bone' image, pledging to be 'critical of the system of forced contributions to state development aid through taxation' and to focus instead on investment in developing economy enterprises. Norway does not have a strong tradition of private philanthropy.

The most significant *intellectual* critiques of Norway's international role in development and peacemaking have been provided by professors Terje Tvedt and Øyvind Østerud. In 2003, Tvedt, a historian at the University of Bergen, published

International affairs and development research in Norway

- Center for International Climate and Environmental Research, Oslo: www.cicero.uio.no
- Chr. Michelsen Institute: www.cmi.no
- Fafo: www.fafo.no
- Fridtjof Nansen Institute: www.fni.no
- International Peace Research Institute, Oslo: www.prio.no
- Norwegian Defence Research Institute: www.ffi.no
- Norwegian Institute of International Affairs: www.nupi.no
- Department of Comparative Politics, University of Bergen: www.uib.no/sampol
- Centre for Development and the Environment, University of Oslo: www.sum.uio.no
- Department of Political Science, University of Oslo: www.statsvitenskap.uio.no

a study that presented a fresh reading of what he termed 'the south-political project'. Using controversial terminology, Tvedt described a 'do-good regime' where 'elite circulation' between the political, research and NGO sectors has created a 'national-corporatist' system. Those inside this system, argued Tvedt, have substantial self-interest in international aid and simultaneously shape the policy and prevent the system from being criticized.

Professor Østerud, a prominent political scientist at the University of Oslo, triggered fierce public debate, later dubbed 'the aid war', with an editorial in *Aftenposten* in 2006. Østerud questioned what had been achieved by decades of Norwegian international assistance or by the country's more recent role as a peacemaker.

The most important critic of Norway's success is probably Hilde Henriksen Waage on the Middle East. Waage argued that the Oslo Accords were not so much the result of brilliant diplomacy, as of the weakness of the Palestinian side at the time. ¹⁵ Although controversial when first published, this interpretation has since gained much ground.

As for systematic evaluations of international aid effectiveness, several studies suggest that Norwegian *and* international assistance has had limited success in stimulating economic growth and reducing poverty. But research also indicates that 'aid effectiveness has increased in recent years' and that international assistance can play an important role in poverty reduction. ¹⁶ This has lent support to the Norwegian government's focus on the Millennium Development Goals and its renewed emphasis on good governance, national ownership and poverty reduction.

In 2006, a report from a government-appointed committee argued that aid had done little to generate investment and growth. It recommended that Norwegian long-term assistance should concentrate on 'poor countries with good governance that are able and willing to achieve poverty reduction and economic development'. These countries should be allowed to manage the funds and bring about their own development.

These broad recommendations resonate with government policy. However, optimizing international assistance is a continuous struggle. In November 2008, an evaluation report from the Office of the Auditor General found 'significant weaknesses' in 'realizing the goals of timely and effective assistance of high quality' in the management of Norway's humanitarian assistance. Case processing times were often too long, there were weaknesses in the financing system and follow-up was inadequate, according to the report.

Yet, despite a critical media and fluctuations in support for political parties, public support for Norway's international assistance remains high and fairly stable. The most recent survey by the Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2007, found that 15% of respondents would increase international assistance, while 47% would keep it at the current level and 32% would reduce it. Three-quarters of respondents also thought that Norwegian assistance is producing good results. ■

¹⁵ For a longer version of this article, visit www.thebrokeronline.eu