

French aid for a new world

# The French Connections

Faced with new geopolitical and environmental challenges, the French government as well as NGOs are changing their rhetoric. A focus on European and international efforts to promote a sustainable world is replacing old slogans of development.

Alamy / Victor Watts



It should come as no surprise that France's development assistance policies are rooted in the country's colonial history. Since the 1960s, that history has had a strong influence on the

geography of French cooperation. At first, aid was provided to the former colonies in Africa and Asia, then in the 1990s to emerging economies such as Brazil, Mexico, China, Indonesia, Nigeria and South Africa, before concentrating on Africa in more recent years.

French aid to all of these countries has been combined with the new migration policy recently harmonized at the European level. Globalization and emerging issues such as food security, the environment and climate change are also gradually rearranging the geopolitical map, leading France to review its partnerships and its strategy.

## Actions speak louder than words

Since the turn of the millennium, French diplomats have made their presence felt at all important international meetings and summits on development. In 2002, at the UN Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey, France pledged to increase its official development assistance (ODA) to 0.7% of GDP by 2015. At a European summit in May 2005, France and its European partners committed to achieve ODA at 0.51% of GDP by 2010.

Also in 2005, France hosted the second High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, together with the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The subsequent 'Paris Declaration' calls on countries to coordinate their bilateral and multilateral aid

## summary

- France's colonial history has long determined the geography of cooperation, but globalization, migration, the environment and climate change have rearranged the geopolitical map.
- France has been at the forefront of initiatives such as the World Social Forum and the Leading Group on Innovative Financing for Development.
- As a result of dialogue between the state and civil society, development and the environment have become an important, joined-up issue in France.
- Traditional divides in French research between development, environment and foreign policy/security, are also gradually disappearing.

policies, in line with the priorities of the recipient countries. In September 2008, at the third High Level Forum in Accra, Ghana, France approved the Accra Declaration, which urges countries to continue to work towards achieving the goals of the Paris Declaration. President Nicolas Sarkozy reaffirmed all of these commitments at the G20 meetings in London and Pittsburgh, and the G8 meeting in Aquila in 2009.

The actual amounts of aid being provided hardly match the official claims, however. Although the percentage of GDP devoted to ODA rose steadily between 2000 and 2005, from 0.30% to 0.47% (€8446 million in 2005), the actual volume of aid fell by more than 15% in 2007. Within Europe, this was the second most significant decrease, after the UK. After a slight increase in aid in 2009 (to 0.42% of GDP), the National Assembly agreed that in the 2010 budget just 0.44% of GDP (€8664 million) would be devoted to development assistance, 0.07% less than the amount promised by the EU partners.

French NGOs have criticized the government's failure to meet the European commitments of 2005, and for inflating official ODA figures by including other assistance to French overseas territories and cancelled debts, and for its lack of clarity regarding the 'welcome fees' paid to foreign students. According to Concord, the European NGO Confederation

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With the benefit of foresight ... Bernard Kouchner, French Foreign Minister, February 2008.

which the French state was at least passively complicit, which came to prevail over democratic principles.

Following the election of President François Mitterand in 1981 – the first victory for the Left since 1957 – an attempt was made to reform French international cooperation. The Ministry dedicated to Africa was dismantled, but not for long. In 1986, partly in response to the reaction of the African leaders for whom it had been a severe blow, the Ministry was reassembled, and the *Francafrique* network continued.

From the mid-1980s, France increasingly sought partners in the North able to share the load of supporting the development of its former colonies. Thus the proportion of multilateral aid increased while bilateral aid was reduced. It gradually became clear that African countries were far worse off, with ever-growing debts, as a result of the structural adjustment policies of the Bretton Woods institutions. But by then the French government had already shifted away from giving aid only to Africa, towards also supporting emerging economies in Asia and Latin America.

Following the end of the Cold War, democratic movements were emerging in many parts of Africa. In response, in June 1990, President Mitterand announced in La Baule that aid and democracy would henceforth be linked; that the poorest African partners would receive grants rather than loans in order to put an end to the mounting debt crisis; and that the French Development Bank would be authorized to give both grants and loans to other poor countries. Unfortunately, this last move created competition with the Ministry for Cooperation, and confusion in the field. At the same time, French technical assistance was severely reduced, from 23,000 people on overseas aid assignments in 1980 to just 2000 in 1998.

The late 1990s marked a renewed interest of the French government in Africa, and its commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (in 2000). But France today is torn between its claim to uphold universal principles such as human rights, its wish to maintain strong alliances with its traditional partners, its need to develop commerce, and, like so many others after 11 September 2001, its renewed concerns about terrorism. French military support abroad, sometimes to authoritarian regimes or fragile governments, was linked to old military agreements (such as that with Chad), or was intended to protect French citizens and private interests abroad or avoid violent crises (as in Côte d'Ivoire). France's efforts to involve the African Union in resolving conflicts have been partly successful.

### Towards coherence

In the past, the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criticized France's complex government structures for aid, which did not promote policy coherence. But in 1998, the Foreign Ministry introduced reforms that

for Relief and Development, other EU countries are guilty of similar reporting practices, albeit to a lesser extent. Nevertheless, the French government recently reiterated that it will meet its promises by 2015.

### The politics of development

The French system for international cooperation remained more or less unchanged from the 1960s to the 1980s. During the first two decades, the Ministry of International Cooperation and Development provided grants to support to the francophone African countries, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was responsible for all other former colonies in Asia and North Africa, while the Central Bank for Economic Cooperation (CCCE) was in charge of disbursing loans to developing countries. Officially, these three government structures were meant to help the former colonies in the transition to development, focusing on infrastructure, agriculture, health, education and research.

In addition to the cooperation agreements, there were military agreements, as well as in some cases secret additional deals concerning strategic resources (oil, gas, uranium, lithium, etc.). The close ties between some African leaders and French businessmen and political parties developed into a corrupt system, later called *Francafrique*, in



Bernard Cassen, co-founder of ATTAC and former director of Le Monde diplomatique, at the World Social Forum, January 2010.

were to remedy this situation. The Ministry for Cooperation disappeared and a single Directorate General for International Cooperation and Development was created within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The French Development Agency (Agence Française de Développement, AFD) was reinforced and given responsibility for implementing projects in areas such as agriculture, basic education and industry.

Coordination among the ministries concerned with development aid policy was structured through the Inter-Ministerial Committee on International Cooperation and Development (CICID), which is chaired by the prime minister, and its secretariat is co-chaired by the ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Finance. In 2005, a follow-up structure was created within the CICID: the Conference on Strategic Orientation and Planning (COSP), headed by the state secretary for cooperation. Between 1998 and 2009, the CICID created so-called 'priority solidarity zones' (ZSPs), and reduced the number of countries receiving assistance from 65 in 1999 to 55 in 2002. Among these are a group of 14 fragile and very poor countries, designated in June 2009.

#### Civil society and the cooperation system

The involvement of NGOs, migrant organizations, local governments (so-called 'decentralized cooperation') and the private sector in development cooperation has been growing since 1980. Gradually, the links between these non-state efforts and the administration have been formalized.

The diverse actors are organized into large national alliances. Coordination SUD (Solidarité Urgence Développement) represents 130 NGOs, le Forum des Organisations de Solidarité Internationale issues des Migrations (FORIM) brings together 700 migrant groups, and Cités Unies France represents cities involved in international cooperation. These alliances also extend to the European level and beyond.

These civil society actors receive little funding from the state cooperation budget. In 2005, NGOs received €95.5 million – less than 1% of ODA, compared with the EU average of 7%. The French government has so far not kept its 2005 promise to double the funding for NGOs.

A last organizational change followed in 2008, as part of the general reform of French public policy. The AFD was given responsibility for the implementation and budgets of all development projects. At the same time, a new Directorate for Global Affairs, Development and Partnerships was created within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, responsible for defining policies and strategy, and controlling the AFD. This new directorate answers the DAC recommendations on improved policy coherence, although its benefits and achievements remain to be seen. First impressions indicate is that there is a will, but obstacles lie ahead, such as the capacity of the AFD, as the main player for operations, to handle its huge number of projects.

#### No longer a welcoming country

Since 2002, and especially since 2007, the dynamics of French development assistance have been linked with a stronger immigration control policy. Indeed, new restrictions on the availability of visas have reduced the possibilities for all but the most talented migrants to settle in France. Then, in late 2007, a new Ministry for Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-development was created and associated with the COSP structure within CICID. At the last CICID meeting in June 2009, it was decided that countries that have signed agreements regarding migration would receive more aid. Although presented as a win-win deal for all partners, this new policy has recently been criticized by migrant NGOs such as Cimade.

Migration policy was one of the major themes of the French EU Presidency in 2008. Wishing to prove its vigilance towards security, the French government, together with its EU colleagues, came out in favour of a harmonization of migration policy. In October 2009, they signed the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum, which proposes five commitments on legal immigration, control of illegal immigration, effective controls at Schengen borders, European asylum, and partnerships with the migrants' countries of origin. This pact was recently criticized in a recent UNDP report.

## Environment and development: global goods

The 'environment' was not an issue in French public debate prior to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, which linked development with concerns about public goods and the environment. But the participating countries did not deliver on their promises. Instead, spurred by accelerating globalization, the general drive has been towards liberalization of finance and economics, rather than to bridge the North-South gap in terms of development and environmental threats.

Environmental awareness took some time to emerge, but after Rio, a growing number of French NGOs took up the issue. In January 2001, the newspaper *Le Monde diplomatique*, the social justice network Attac, and other French and Brazilian social movements decided to create a forum as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum. Since the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001, its annual meetings have become more popular, and French NGOs have become increasingly engaged in environmental issues and sustainable development in general.

The government's environmental awareness became apparent at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, when President Chirac noted that 'our planet is burning and we are looking away'. A year later, Chirac established a working group to come up with innovative means of financing development. The report of the Landau group, under the auspices of the UN and supported by Brazil, France and Chile, led to the introduction in France of an 'international solidarity levy' on air tickets, the revenue from which is used to pay for drugs to treat AIDS and other diseases. Today, the Paris-based Leading Group on Innovative Financing for Development is supported by more than 50 governments.

Climate change and the environment were major issues during the 2007 presidential campaign. Five of the candidates, including Nicolas Sarkozy, signed the *Pacte écologique*, launched by writer Nicolas Hulot, which stated that the environmental crisis should be a high government priority. The pact led to a national debate, the *Grenelle environnement*, that brought together representatives of all stakeholders under the umbrella of the new president. This political breakthrough galvanized French activism at both European and international levels in the run-up to the UN climate conference in Copenhagen in December 2009.

Central to the negotiations on climate change have been the economic costs of limiting carbon dioxide emissions and adaptation in developing countries. President Sarkozy recently responded with his 'justice/climate action plan', in which he proposed to assist the poorest countries.

## The waiting game


The new concepts of globalization and global public good have challenged earlier distinctions between developed and developing countries, as well as the nature of development assistance. A new vision of international solidarity is needed. In June 2009, the French government announced that its cooperation policy would focus on achieving the 2015 ODA objective; implementing the commitments made at the G20

meeting in London in April 2009; improving the focus of aid and coordination with other donors; looking at innovative financing for development; and linking up civil society action to government efforts. In fact, it was as a result of the dialogue between the state and civil society early this century, reinforced by the *Grenelle environnement* in 2008, that development and the environment have become an important, joined-up issue in France.

If, thanks to its internal policies, France is finding a new legitimacy on environmental issues at the international level, there is no evidence that future global negotiations will favour France, or Europe, or the developing countries. Indeed, the financial consequences of environmental regulation in developing countries – particularly in the poorest countries – are a key issue. Copenhagen was unsuccessful on this point, disappointing both developing countries and NGOs.

Faced with the never-ending waiting game of countries which are, at the end of the day, primarily interested in defending their short-term national interests, the question is: will French civil society stakeholders go further in their plans for regional and global governance of NGOs in order to achieve deeper and fairer cooperation? Recent opinion polls indicate that French citizens are still willing to give money and support to assistance programmes for developing countries, despite the economic downturn.

Besides the official state cooperation, whose words and actions can sometimes conflict, a new design seems to be needed for new authorities bringing together authorized representatives, if citizens are to play a more active role in helping to solve major global problems. ■

 A longer version of this article can be found at [www.thebrokeronline.eu](http://www.thebrokeronline.eu)

## A changing research landscape

Since the 1990s, as awareness of global issues has grown, the traditional divide in French research between development, the environment and foreign policy/security has become less marked.

In 2002, the commitments made by the French government at the UN conferences on financing for development (Monterrey) and sustainable development (Johannesburg) had consequences for national research priorities. New research organizations were created, such as the National Research Agency (ANR, 2005), the Foundation for Research on Biodiversity (FRB, 2008), and the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI, 2001), which has played an important role in bringing together foreign policy, environmental and development research.

More recently, thematic alliances (life sciences, energy, etc.) have brought together researchers from diverse institutions. In 2009, the new Consortium for Agriculture, Food, Animal Health and the Environment created AGREENIUM, which links top research institutions, including Cirad and INRA. Cirad is creating a new 'sustainable development campus' to link several research institutions and NGOs.