The Christmas tsunami and public support for development cooperation in the Netherlands

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On Boxing Day 2004, a seaquake in the coastal waters of Indonesia led to a series of tidal waves (tsunami) which flooded a dozen countries over two continents. While adding a new word to the vocabulary of many people, the tsunami was one of the most devastating natural disasters in recent history. Almost a quarter of a million people lost their lives and the survival of millions more was threatened due to the loss of agricultural land, the devastation of health and educational facilities and the loss of their loved ones.

A second tsunami soon occurred, but this one brought compassion and money. Governments all over the world promised billions in emergency and rehabilitation assistance, international organisations joined hands, with the UN as the overall coordinating agency. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had little difficulty in raising money for the tsunami victims. In the Netherlands the Cooperative Aid Organisations (SHO) received a total of around €205 million from the Dutch public within two months. That was four times the amount raised during the most successful disaster campaign up to then (see table 1). However, public support in the Netherlands (as elsewhere) went a lot further than giving money to the traditional aid organisations.

Table 1 The top 10 SHO campaigns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campaign</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Revenue (x 1000 euro)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Earthquake Asia (tsunami)</td>
<td>26-12-2004</td>
<td>&gt; 205,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Refugees Kosovo</td>
<td>01-04-1999 / 31-03-2000</td>
<td>51,915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Central America</td>
<td>12-11-1998 / 31-03-1999</td>
<td>37,220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Rwanda</td>
<td>14-05-1994 / 31-12-1994</td>
<td>35,867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Earthquake Turkey</td>
<td>19-08-1999 / 31-03-2000</td>
<td>30,484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Darfur (Sudan)</td>
<td>01-07-2004 / 24-12-2004</td>
<td>19,975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Campaign for Africa</td>
<td>14-06-1992 / 31-12-1992</td>
<td>18,486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Africa dies of hunger</td>
<td>06-12-1990 / 21-05-1991</td>
<td>17,398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Hunger in Southern Africa</td>
<td>30-07-2002 / 28-11-2003</td>
<td>12,635</td>
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Besides numerous activities by individuals and groups aimed at raising funds for the SHO, many started their own initiatives to help the tsunami victims. There were people who, with or without a sum of money, travelled to the region to assist in person, while others set up their own small and informal projects and/or organisations. The latter seem to have been successful in raising substantial amounts of money from the public, as well as in providing a chance to express the need for support in a non-financial way by becoming volunteers. The tsunami relief activities became a new national hype particularly in the first two months following the disaster.

Naturally, the record funds raised by the SHO and the fact that a lot of citizens had started their own initiatives or had joined those of others led to lengthy discussions. A number of explanations for the responses were soon provided (although not always substantiated by any major research), ranging from the fact that the tsunami had happened on Boxing Day (making it a kind of Christian duty to assist) to the idea that Europeans were also affected by the disaster, and from the fact that it was a natural disaster (so the people affected were ‘true’ victims) to the idea that it created a feeling of unity among the Dutch population after a period of political turmoil (e.g., the assassinations of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh). Simultaneously, it also raised questions relating to public support for international development in the future. Was the support provided by the Dutch public (whether in cash, goods and/or time) a kind of breakthrough in the sense that, from now on, there would be more public involvement in the broad field of international development? Or was the response to the tsunami in the Netherlands just that the result of hype? Questions like these became even more important in light of the strong emphasis on public support within official Dutch development cooperation.

Public support in the Netherlands

The term public support [draagvlak in Dutch] is commonly used in development cooperation circles. It is one of the key elements of the new cofinancing system (MFS) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is to start in 2007. NGOs that apply for funding need to show their level of support within Dutch society. In the words of the MFS policy, they need to show their embeddedness or anchoring. In practice this boils down to the need for organisations to show that they work with Dutch volunteers, receive part of their income from the Dutch general public and/or are cooperating with other Dutch organisations. More important perhaps is the fact that these NGOs can ‘only’ receive a maximum of 75 per cent of their total income directly or indirectly from the Dutch government. The other 25 per cent therefore has to be acquired elsewhere, for instance from the general public. This makes the 25 per cent rule an indicator of public support for the organisation (DGIS 2005).

The fact that public support is commonly used does not mean that there is a clear and coherent idea of what it means. As seen above, the MFS talks about the amount of financial support or the number of volunteers an organisation has as indicators of public support. As far as the National Commission for International Cooperation and Sustainable Development (NCDO) is concerned, this view is too narrow-minded and it
therefore includes the opinions and the knowledge people have of international cooperation.

In combining such notions as knowledge, opinions and actions (e.g., voluntary work), Develtere (2003) sees public support as a multi-dimensional concept: partly to do with the level of knowledge, partly the level of opinion (attitude) and partly the level of behaviour. As these three dimensions are not causally related it is by no means easy to measure the extent of public support. This is further complicated by the fact that it continues to be unclear how much (and what kind of) knowledge, what kind of opinion and what kind of behaviour or action is needed.

In recent years, a number of studies have tried to measure the three dimensions of public support. Anker Solutions (2004: 12), for example, tried to specify the extent to which people are open to knowledge (information) on development cooperation and showed that 44 per cent of the respondents occasionally read about development cooperation, while 10 per cent claim to read almost everything. Overall this means that almost three out of four respondents try to stay informed of development issues, at least to some extent.

The same study also showed that 66 per cent of the respondents were in favour of policy changes in development cooperation, whereas only 26 per cent thought that the current policy is the right one (ibid: 3). These figures seem to suggest that Dutch people are generally unhappy with the way development funds are spent. Surprisingly, 60 per cent think that the money for development cooperation is well spent and 74 per cent state that the budget for development cooperation in the Netherlands should at least remain at the same level. The conclusion then is that, despite a certain degree of scepticism, Dutch public support for development cooperation is generally strong.

However, public support in the sense of knowledge and opinion does not automatically mean visibility in behaviour. Several studies show that although the majority of Dutch citizens regard development cooperation as important, only a relatively small percentage also believe they have an active role to play in this field. This third dimension of public support can be seen as philanthropic behaviour. Philanthropy is defined as the voluntary contribution of goods, time and/or money to charity (Schuyt 2005).

To many development organisations this behavioural dimension is the most important one, particularly in light of the fact that, from 2009 onwards, they will need to fund 25 per cent of the total budget from sources other than the ministry.

Although no data is available with regard to contributions in goods (and most official development organisations are hardly interested in this type of support), it is likely that contributions in the form of goods are quite substantial in the case of private initiatives in the field of development cooperation. Stories about truckloads of goods being shipped to the tsunami-affected countries are a clear indication. According to Schuyt (2005: 81), slightly more than 41 per cent of Dutch citizens work voluntarily for at least one civil society organisation. Most volunteers are active in the field of sports, religious activities and health. Development cooperation (taken together here with human rights and refugees) attracts 1.9 per cent of Dutch citizens as volunteers, notwithstanding the fact that private initiatives within this field have boomed in recent years (e.g., Beerends & Broere 2004: chapter 13 and Context 2005). In terms of money, the Dutch public is said to be generous, with a total of €2.2 billion donated to
charity by the general public in 2003 (individuals, legacies, funds, companies and charity lotteries). However, international aid organisations only receive some 9 per cent (€483 million) of these donations (Schuyt 2005: 12).

All in all, public support in the Netherlands for development cooperation is high if one looks at the knowledge and opinion dimensions. With regard to active public support, the overall picture is less positive since relatively few people become development cooperation volunteers and financial contributions are a relatively small part of total contributions.

Cooperating aid organisations

Within hours of the waves hitting the Asian coasts, the SHO had opened its special bank account for the tsunami victims. The SHO received tremendous support when setting up its fundraising campaign. Different media organisations offered free advertising space, paid all the expenses for a live television show and started to raise funds themselves for the SHO. Other NGOs decided not to raise money on their own account, but donated the funds they received through their own campaigns directly to SHO. The Dutch government contributed €5 million.

The SHO seems to have been successful in communicating the seriousness of the disaster to the media and the Dutch public. Over 50 per cent of the respondents in research carried out by Valk (2005: 88) thought that the tsunami was the world’s biggest disaster in the last fifty years. The SHO, which was already relatively well-known because of earlier fundraising campaigns, was ‘all over the place’ and received most of the donated funds. It was even said that at one point in time the bank account number of the SHO (giro555) was a stronger trademark in the Netherlands than Coca Cola.

About one out of every two households in the Netherlands contributed directly to the SHO. This was substantially higher than in earlier campaigns. The difference was due to contributions from households that normally do not contribute to development organisations at all. In a survey conducted by the department of philanthropy of the University of Amsterdam (Meijer et al. 2005), 40 per cent of the ‘givers’ were what they called ‘new givers’ (i.e., those that do not normally give money to charities). In our own survey the number of ‘new givers’ was 28.8 per cent, which is lower but still substantial (Valk 2005: 84).

Average contributions per household (€50) were also high. They represent approximately 20 per cent of a regular annual household budget for aid organisations (Valk 2005: 84). As mentioned above, the SHO received more than €200 million for its tsunami campaign, or four times more than the most successful fundraising initiative in their history. This ‘sudden’ generosity does not seem to be due to a feeling of trust in the way the SHO spends its money. On the contrary, only one out of every three respondents thinks the SHO will spend their money in a proper way. This lack of trust is based on the public’s feeling about the way the SHO operated in the past. Just 30 per cent think that the money the SHO raised in the past was spent right (Valk 2005: 87).

This lack of trust can be explained, at least in part, by the way the SHO communicates with the public. Although they were successful in expressing the seriousness of
the disaster, they were less successful in communicating with the public afterwards. In general, this communication is of an impersonal character. The national scale of operation of the SHO makes more personal communication extremely difficult at the very least and perhaps even impossible. Besides, the fact that the SHO is basically an umbrella name under which aid organisations raise funds together (i.e., it is not an organisation itself and has no staff of its own) makes communication difficult and personal communication practically impossible. Finally, communication is hampered by the fact that all the member organisations of the SHO work through their own local partners and many of the projects are (also due to the specific circumstances in the countries involved) complex.

All this does not mean that, once it became aware of the success of the tsunami campaign, the SHO did not try to improve its communication. Their website, for example, includes comprehensive news items on the SHO and they also send their supporters a three-monthly report detailing their activities and expenditure. In December 2005, one year after the tsunami, the SHO even published a free nationally distributed paper explaining not only what had been done up to now but also the plans for 2006.

All in all, the SHO tried to establish closer links with existing and potential supporters in the Netherlands. In doing so, it made mistakes, some of which had been made before. The free national paper mentioned above, for example, only included information about the successful project. By (again) only mentioning what had gone well, the impression was created that everything goes well. Put differently: this way of communicating seems to be based on the idea that the public only wants to hear positive news and/or is not capable of understanding that emergency aid (or development aid in general for that matter) can run into major problems. Such success stories can quite easily become a burden and lead to a negative public attitude, particularly when the media are on the lookout for things that go wrong. A recent report on public support shows that people think that organisations can no longer get away with ‘one-sided reports on success stories’. This one-sidedness has not enhanced their credibility. Mistakes and failures also need to be mentioned, not to be punished but as input for learning, for showing that the organisations indeed learns and in order to emphasise that the reality of development cooperation is a complex one in which sustainable successes are achieved on the basis of trial and error (Commissie Draagvlak en Effectiviteit Ontwikkelings samenwerking 2006: 19).

The role the media have played in previous SHO fundraising campaigns illustrates that public opinion can easily be turned from positive into negative. The Kosovo fundraising initiative was the most successful fundraising event before the tsunami and here too the media was instrumental in making people aware of the seriousness of the situation and the need to donate. The official communication on the part of the organisations in the SHO was likewise restricted to positive stories. Six years later, a Dutch national paper reported that many things had, in fact, gone wrong (Dohmen 2005). Money had disappeared or had been confiscated by the local mafia and projects had failed. The low trust of the Dutch public in the SHO was thus confirmed, even six years after the actual campaign.

By repeating the good news reporting in the case of the tsunami, the SHO became vulnerable to bad media publicity. A television show (TrosRadar) was the first to show
that not everything went as smoothly as the SHO wanted the Dutch public to believe. TrosRadar checked information, which had been provided by the SHO itself, in the field. There they found that some of the projects that were supposed to have been finished had never actually existed and that some projects SHO organisations had claimed as their own were in fact projects run by other organisations. No matter whether the claims were true or false, such media coverage only dented the already relatively low trust the general public and, particularly, new givers had in the organisation. Communication and the media, therefore, affected public support in the beginning of the campaign and led to a lack of trust later.

Media

The media normally play the role of communicating opinions between the public, NGOs and the government. All the actors try to express their opinion in the media and influence other actors. The media themselves then play a mainly indirect role and one which is passive when compared with other actors. Indirect and passive does not, however, mean insignificant. Seventy per cent of the Dutch public regard television and radio as the main sources of information about development cooperation, with 19 per cent attributing this role to newspapers and magazines (Anker Solutions 2004: 11). The media are, therefore, the main source of information about development cooperation and seem to play a decisive role when it comes to knowledge acquisition and opinions (and perhaps action). In the case of the tsunami, the media fulfilled a traditional role but combined that with a more active role in some cases.

The media therefore informed the public in a traditional way by providing news about the disaster and the opinions of victims, NGOs, governments, the Dutch public and so on. The demand for news from the general public perhaps surprised even those involved in the media. After all, the tsunami was front page news for over two weeks. This made it possible, but also necessary, for the media to adopt different roles. In some cases, certain sections of the media became more active. Different media openly expressed sympathy for private initiatives and the SHO. They even sometimes made an appeal to their public to become active as well by donating money, goods or time (by becoming a volunteer). In a way, these forms of media lost – at least to some extent – their independent position and perhaps their objectivity. By supporting these actions openly they no longer merely communicated opinions, but gave opinions themselves.

Essentially the same occurred in the case of the live fundraising show on behalf of the SHO which was broadcast in January 2005. Although these kinds of shows had happened before, the scale was quite new. For the first time, commercial and public broadcasting channels joined forces in a three-hour live show. A similar show was broadcast on Dutch national radio, by both commercial and public stations. This ensured that a large majority of the Dutch public received the message and request to donate to the tsunami victims.

In a few cases the media were responsible for taking the last step in embracing initiatives that were intended to help these victims. They did not ‘just’ support the initiative or ‘just’ raise money for them, but became the initiative themselves by trying to
help in the tsunami areas. For example, a national newspaper started by offering verbal support to a small private initiative. As a result, the organisation behind this initiative grew spectacularly and even to such an extent that the original initiators were no longer able to handle the organisation. The newspaper then stepped in to help out and to ensure that the money received from its readers was used in a proper way. Due to the amount of money raised, the intentions of the organisation were expanded from helping one family to helping a village. Readers were asked whether they wanted to go to the village and help directly as a volunteer. This call resulted in over 1,200 applications. All in all, by getting themselves involved the newspaper not only turned into an opinion-maker but even into a direct aid provider. This made it vulnerable to the same kind of negative coverage mentioned above.

Public support

Due to the massive media coverage, the tsunami was an almost ever-present news item in the Netherlands. At the same time, this coverage is likely to have contributed significantly to the Dutch public’s general knowledge of the disaster. The CIDIN survey showed that 60 per cent of the respondents knew exactly when the tsunami disaster took place, while another 20 per cent named a date within two days of Boxing Day. An overwhelming majority of respondents (93.6 per cent) knew for certain that Indonesia was one of the countries hit by the tsunami. A lot of people knew that Sri Lanka and Thailand were also affected (83.5 per cent and 92.1 per cent respectively). Although only a few people were able to mention another tsunami-affected country (let alone African countries), most people had some basic knowledge of the disaster (Valk 2005: 46).

People’s views of development cooperation in general and on the aid given to help the tsunami victims in particular were measured to give an impression of the second dimension of public support, namely attitude or opinion. On average, Dutch people are satisfied with how aid organisations spend their money and with the total amount of money spent. Despite this positive view of Dutch aid, people have little knowledge about exactly how the aid funds are being spent. Few people indicated that they knew for what and in which manner the funds are being used.

This lack of knowledge seems to add to an overall negative feeling on the use of the tsunami funds. Although many are convinced that the development organisations try hard to spend the money in a good way, few believe they are doing so effectively. Only 33.9 per cent of the people that supported the SHO think the funds are going to be spent in such a way that it will help those who most need it. A survey by Onze Wereld Magazine (Ars 2006: 29) came up with similar figures: 37 per cent of the Dutch population and only 24 per cent of the readers of the magazine think the tsunami money is spent well.

About two out of three respondents gave money to the cooperating aid organisations. As already mentioned, some of them can be regarded as new donors whereas 50 per cent had given money to a national SHO fundraising campaign on at least one previous occasion (Valk 2005: 50). The SHO was, however, certainly not the only organisation to receive substantial financial support from the public. There were plenty
of private initiatives and, apart from attracting goods and volunteers, these were also successful in raising money.

**Private initiatives**

Despite all the funds raised, only 25 per cent of the Dutch public feel that they were actively involved in helping the tsunami victims. This indicates that many do not regard donating money as an active expression of public support. The most active way of expressing such support is to start a private initiative. Although there is no reliable data on how many of these private development initiatives exist in the Netherlands, estimates run from 6,500 (Brok & Bouzoubaa 2005) to over 10,000 (Van Voorst 2005). Equally, there is no clear data to show that the number of private initiatives has substantially increased in recent years, although many are convinced that this is the case. Beerends & Broere (2004: 175) conclude that these initiatives have increased in number significantly since the 1990s while Context (2006: 10) detected manifestations of such an increase in the substantial growth of ‘easily accessible subsidy windows’.

Neither is there any data showing how many people started an initiative after the tsunami. Nevertheless, the impression is that many of these private initiatives were started after the disaster and it is quite clear that they gained a lot of media attention. The tsunami disaster certainly helped to make these private initiatives more visible to the Dutch public. In more concrete terms, they also became popular because they were presented as working faster, more effectively and more efficiently than traditional organisations and the government.

Overall, the growth of private initiatives is due to globalisation, to the fact that people travel to destinations further away and therefore come into contact more with poverty, to the process of individualisation in our own society and (perhaps more specifically to Dutch society) to decompartmentalisation (ontzuiling) (e.g., Beerends & Broere 2004: 175). As indicated above, the fact that several subsidy schemes for such private initiatives have also been initiated in recent years and the ‘lack of trust’ in traditional development organisations might have contributed to the phenomenon. A survey of post-tsunami private initiatives revealed that they were based on three main motivations: (1) a personal connection with the region or a country in the tsunami-stricken area; (2) the feeling that traditional development organisations are not able to assist the tsunami victims (or at least not in an effective manner); and (3) the idea that something had to be done immediately. The latter is then connected to the second as the traditional development organisations are also often viewed as inefficient and slow. These motivations are comparable to those which formed the basis for starting other, non-tsunami related, private initiatives (also see Brok & Bouzoubaa 2005). All in all, there are few reasons to expect more sustainable general public support because of the tsunami.

The fast way of working with which these private initiatives are identified seems, in particular, to contribute to the fact that 70 per cent of the respondents feel that these initiatives are necessary in a period of emergency aid. Besides, they carry with them an aura of effectiveness with two out of three respondents believing that private initiatives
are successful in reaching the people who need the aid most and only 6.8 per cent thinking that their results in the tsunami areas will not be positive in the long term.

One of the main reasons for the high level of public trust in these initiatives is their method of communication. Communication with – potential – supporters often takes place in a direct and personal manner using the Internet as a preferred medium. This makes it possible to update the public on steps taken and progress made while using photos and videos for easy reference. Although such communication created a feeling of openness it also led to involvement and trust in the organisation. From the point of view of more sustainable public support this is important as it might mean that people will also be willing to support development cooperation through these private initiatives in the future.

Besides, these private initiatives are popular for the way they accept different types of support. Whereas traditional development organisations seem to be geared mainly towards financial support, the private initiatives also welcome contributions in goods and rely much more on volunteers. This makes these initiatives a suitable alternative for those wanting to contribute in a more active way than by giving money.

Conclusions

The general rule that it is extremely difficult to predict the future is certainly also applicable to public support for development cooperation. Still, there are few signs that the almost nationwide support after the tsunami in the Netherlands will have a bearing on the future. Few people have indicated that they are willing to spend (more) money or time on development cooperation in the future, even though they contributed generously after the disaster in December 2004. The lack of trust in official development organisations, with only one-third of people expecting the funds to be used effectively, seems to be an important reason for this. Despite more transparent communication by the SHO, the official organisations have not managed to bring about a change in attitude among the general public. Therefore, there are few signs that the tsunami has triggered a more sustainable public support.

Perhaps an exception should be made here for private initiatives. The tsunami caused a greater awareness of these initiatives among the general public and they now seem to offer an alternative to the official agencies. For example, in contrast to these agencies, private initiatives offer the possibility of more active involvement (e.g., volunteer work) as well as an opportunity to donate goods. Besides, public trust in these initiatives seems to be high largely due to the more open, transparent and easily accessible communication, in which context the media played an important role not only in critically reviewing the work of the official agencies but also in supporting (sometimes very directly) the work of the private initiatives. This once again highlights the central role (and therefore responsibility) of the media and its importance for public support for development cooperation, now and in the future.
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Notes

1 The Cooperative Aid Organisations (Samenwerkende Hulporganisaties (SHO)) is a coalition of nine aid organisations whose principal aim is to raise money jointly whenever there is a major disaster.


3 This article is largely based on the MA research carried out by Han Valk (2005).

4 The largest recipients of public donations were the churches with €1,178 million (23%), followed by sports and recreation (18%), culture (12%), health (11%).

5 There is no reliable data on the amount of funds raised by these private initiatives in general, nor after the tsunami. It is to be expected that some of them managed to raise substantial amounts after the tsunami (amounting to a few million euros), while others did not manage to raise much more than a few thousand euros.