

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO OVERSEAS AID AND DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**NEW ZEALAND
FOREIGN AFFAIRS & TRADE**

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) is responsible for New Zealand's international aid efforts, via the New Zealand Aid Programme. The mission of the New Zealand Aid Programme is to achieve “shared prosperity in our region and beyond”, with a threefold focus on:

- Achieving sustainable development
- Reducing poverty, and
- Delivering humanitarian support.

Ensuring ongoing public support for development cooperation is vital, as it underpins political backing for effective and dynamic development cooperation, building cross-party political support and more engaged parliaments. Evidence suggests that while there is continued support for development cooperation, public confidence in public institutions is declining in some countries.

When the last gauge of public opinion in New Zealand was conducted in 2007, under a third of the public were confident that overseas aid actually makes a difference. However, there have been significant changes in the wider world since then. These include (but are not limited to) the global financial crisis, increased conversation about the widening divide between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ in New Zealand and pressure on government budgets (health and housing, for example), global climate change which particularly threatens the islands of the Pacific, continued media focus (both positive and negative) on Pacific nations relating to issues like health, migration, labour, ‘overstaying’, and the rise of new social media channels and new models of donation (with Give a Little campaigns, for example).

There has also been heightened public interest in New Zealand’s development programme following the May 2018 announcement by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, signalling an increase in New Zealand’s aid budget, and the Coalition Government’s intention for a renewed relationship with the Pacific, known as the ‘Pacific Reset’ (see Minister Peters’ speech *‘Shifting the dial’*).

Given all these factors, the context for people’s support for international development cooperation may well have changed. Updating its understanding of public perception in 2018 is important for MFAT, to underpin an updated development communication and engagement strategy to communicate effective development outcomes to the New Zealand general public.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of the study was to provide a benchmark of New Zealanders’ awareness of, confidence in, and perceptions of the government’s development co-operation efforts, and their support for and awareness of specific development issues, particularly those in the Pacific.

METHOD

The study included seven qualitative focus groups to understand the range of views about development cooperation, followed by a quantitative online survey of 1,229 New Zealand citizens and permanent residents aged 18 years and over, conducted in October 2018.

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INTEREST IN AND KNOWLEDGE OF OVERSEAS AID AND DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

Interest levels in overseas aid and development assistance have risen since research was undertaken into public perceptions of New Zealand's overseas aid and development assistance in 2007. While more than a third of New Zealanders (34%) indicated that they were not interested in this topic in 2007, this proportion has fallen to fewer than a quarter of New Zealanders (22%) in 2018. In terms of interest, a third (33%) of New Zealanders now say they are either *very interested* or *reasonably interested* in overseas aid and development assistance.

There is a gap between interest and knowledge, which may be partly explained by low levels of exposure to media coverage of overseas aid and development assistance. Just over a quarter of New Zealanders surveyed (28%) say they have seen or heard something in the media about New Zealand's overseas aid spending in the last three months, while in 2007, close to two-thirds of New Zealanders (63%) declared that they had read, seen or heard something in the media about overseas aid in the last two months or so.

Interest in overseas aid outpaces knowledge, with a third (33%) of New Zealanders saying they are interested in overseas aid compared with only 9% saying they know *a reasonable amount* or *a great deal* about aid. Those with self-assessed higher levels of knowledge show greater levels of interest in the topic of overseas aid – 72% of those who say they know *a reasonable amount* or *a great deal* say they are interested in the topic, compared with only 19% of those who know *little, next to nothing* or *nothing* about it.

ATTITUDES TOWARD AID PROVISION BY THE NEW ZEALAND GOVERNMENT

Despite low levels of knowledge about overseas aid and development assistance, the majority of New Zealanders have an opinion about whether the New Zealand Government should provide aid to less developed countries around the world. Support for the provision of overseas aid and development assistance by the New Zealand Government is not universal among those surveyed. Overall, 57% of New Zealanders agree with the provision of aid to less developed countries but 16% disagree. New Zealanders who are interested in overseas aid and development assistance are more likely to agree with its provision. For example, 77% of those who say they are interested in the topic agree with its provision, compared with only 25% of those who say they are not interested agreeing with the provision of development assistance aid by the New Zealand Government.

Agreement with the provision of aid is underpinned by beliefs that giving assistance to less developed countries is the morally right thing to do, as a country who cares about and has the means to support those who are less advantaged than we are.

Among the 16% who disagree with the New Zealand Government providing aid, the perceived need to focus on our domestic issues and 'fix' New Zealand first is the overwhelming belief. These people talked of New Zealand facing increasing welfare issues and poverty with a growing divide between the haves and have-nots, housing issues, and an apparent lack of domestic funds to resolve these problems.

Despite general agreement with New Zealand providing aid (57%), more than a third (36%) of New Zealanders surveyed disagree that New Zealand is currently in a good financial position to give aid money to other countries. Disagreement that New Zealand is in a good financial position to give aid money outweighs agreement (28% agreeing and 36% disagreeing).

EFFECTIVENESS OF NEW ZEALAND GOVERNMENT SPENDING ON OVERSEAS AID AND DEVELOPMENT

Four in ten (39%) New Zealanders feel that they have not heard about or do not know enough to rate the effectiveness of the New Zealand Government's spending on overseas aid and development. However, more New Zealanders surveyed feel that the New Zealand Government's spending is effective than ineffective, with just under a third (31%) believing it is effective and only 13% believing it is not effective.

Among those one in three people (31% of the total sample) who consider spending is effective, the top three reasons given for feeling the New Zealand Government's spending is effective are based on faith that overseas aid spending is effective, in the absence of evidence: namely that spending is helping people in need, aid is sent for disaster relief and we help neighbouring countries.

One in five (19%) of those who think New Zealand Government spending on overseas is ineffective, agree with the Government providing aid to less developed countries. Is there potential to increase agreement with government provision of aid, through increased communication about the effectiveness of spending?

Among the 13% of New Zealanders who think that the New Zealand Government's spending is not effective, three main reasons were given. This group consider that giving aid is *a waste of money/aid/money doesn't fix the issues – only the symptoms*, or that *aid money goes to the various governments/officials/not the people who need it*. The third reason given relates to perceived greater need for spending in New Zealand before spending abroad.

When asked specifically to rate the effectiveness of different types of agencies at providing overseas aid, non-governmental organisations or charities are considered to be the most effective at providing overseas aid (61% of New Zealanders think they are effective). In comparison, just over half (53%) of New Zealanders consider the New Zealand Government is effective at providing overseas aid.

After being asked whether they believe the New Zealand Government's spending on overseas aid is effective, respondents were asked the reasons for their view. The views of the 31% who consider the Government's spending is effective are based on perceptions that aid helps those in need, that New Zealand provides aid in the event of disasters and that New Zealand helps neighbouring South Pacific countries. Those 13% who consider that spending is not effective are concerned that aid addresses the symptoms not the underlying causes, that money goes to governments rather than to the communities who need it, and also that New Zealand has issues that are not met and should be addressed first.

AID AND DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE FOR THE PACIFIC ISLANDS REGION

The New Zealanders surveyed have limited knowledge of the New Zealand Government's aid programme to the Pacific Island region, with only 8% saying they know a *reasonable amount* or a *great deal*.

Support for New Zealand focusing its overseas aid development assistance programme on the Pacific Islands region is not universal. While half (51%) of those surveyed feel such a focus is appropriate, 12% consider it to be inappropriate. Not surprisingly support is greater among Pacific peoples at 64%, but also not universal, with 6% of Pacific peoples considering it inappropriate.

New Zealanders are more accepting of arguments for Pacific-focused aid support that relate to our shared history, our geographic proximity and our understanding of regional challenges, than to strategic arguments such as Pacific problems not becoming our problems and/or protecting our interests against other countries that might have influence in the Pacific region.

Survey respondents were asked about their view of three different initiatives that the New Zealand Government could undertake to support the Pacific Islands region, recognising that each could have an effect on New Zealand as well as on the Islands. Views were positive toward all three.

- Support for *developing trade agreements to help Pacific Island countries get their products to New Zealand markets* was most widespread (70% in favour) and only a minority (4%) opposed to this. The perceived benefits are economic ones for the Islands and the potential for fresher and riper products for New Zealand.
- There is positive support for *allowing seasonal workers to come to New Zealand to help with agricultural work in areas with labour shortages*, with 66% in favour and 11% opposed. Those in favour could see the value of offering employment where New Zealand has labour shortages – provided there is not exploitation of such workers, while those opposed think that this could deprive New Zealanders of employment.
- Two in three people (65%) favour taking action in New Zealand *to help reduce green-house gas emissions that contribute to climate change and rising sea levels*, which particularly affect some Pacific countries, while 9% do not favour this. Those in favour can understand the impact of rising sea levels and consider any action is important, while those opposed consider New Zealand's contribution to green-house gas emissions is insignificant globally.

SEGMENTING NEW ZEALANDERS

New Zealanders are not all the same in their opinions towards overseas aid and development assistance. Segmentation analysis was undertaken and five distinct segments identified in this research. Positively, the segments who are supportive of overseas aid and development assistance are in the majority, with 29% of New Zealanders surveyed being 'Unconditional Givers' and 26% being 'Conscious Givers'.

The 'Unconditional Givers' segment is characterised by their unquestioning support of New Zealand providing aid and cite altruistic reasons for providing this aid to poorer countries.

While the 'Conscious Givers' segment also supports New Zealand's provision of aid, they have a more nuanced understanding of overseas aid and development assistance, understanding the drawbacks, as well as the more strategic and non-altruistic reasons for providing development aid.

The non-supportive segments include the 'Kiwis First' segment and the 'Aid Rejectors' segment, which make up 16% and 8% of New Zealanders, respectively. Both segments have negative perceptions of overseas aid and development assistance, but for different reasons. The 'Kiwis First' segment feels that New Zealand has enough of its own problems and should focus on these before providing overseas aid and development assistance, while the 'Aid Rejectors' segment does not support aid primarily because they think it is ineffective and/or addresses symptoms rather than the underlying issues within developing countries.

The fifth segment, a 'Passive Acceptors' segment sits in the middle of the Givers and the non-supportive segments and represents 21% of those surveyed. People in this segment do not hold strong views on overseas aid and development assistance. They do not have a negative perception of aid and its effectiveness, but are neutral about who should provide it and how it should be provided.

COMMUNICATION OPPORTUNITIES

The higher levels of interest amongst those who have read, seen or heard something in the media about New Zealand's overseas aid spending/giving in the last three months (44% of those who have read, seen or heard something say they are interested compared with 33% of the total sample) suggests that hearing more about aid may help stimulate interest in the topic of overseas aid and development assistance with the potential to enhance perceptions of the value of aid provision.

In addition to the positive correlations between media coverage and perceptions, there is interest among New Zealanders for more information on overseas aid and development assistance. Only a small minority (5%) say they hear too much about overseas aid and development, while just over

half (55%) of New Zealanders say they hear too little information about New Zealand's development aid.

The perception of hearing too little information is most widely held among the Unconditional Giver group (at 66%), but significant proportions of the other four segments (ranging from 42% among the Aid Rejectors to 56% among Conscious Givers and Kiwis First) also say they hear too little.

In terms of targeting messaging to any particular group, the two Giver segments and the Passive Acceptors segment, are more open to hearing messages, in terms of their current attitudes and perceptions towards overseas aid and development assistance.

There is opportunity for greater media coverage of New Zealand's aid related activities and communication about the effectiveness of specific aid programmes. Focus on what and how the New Zealand Government's overseas aid and development programmes help to achieve positive outcomes for people in developing countries will help raise the profile of giving, potentially generating greater interest in overseas aid and development assistance and support amongst New Zealanders. There is need for care however, given the significant proportion of New Zealanders with the view that New Zealand cannot afford to give development aid.

ABOUT NIELSEN

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