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Dutch politician asks if aid really aids



In a new book, former politician Arend Jan Boekestijn joins the choir of people challenging the usefulness of development aid.

By Mark Kranenburg

Arend Jan Boekestijn, a former member of parliament for the right-wing liberal party VVD, presented his long-awaited book about development aid on Thursday. The book, which he has promised will "reveal all" about development aid is tellingly titled: *The Price of a Bad Conscience*.

Its main tenet: the current tools of the development trade lead to aid-addiction in receiving countries and something needs to be done about it fast. "I fear that development aid in its current form does more harm than it does good," Boekestijn said on Thursday morning.

Faux-pas

Only weeks ago Arend Jan Boekestijn dominated the news for a completely different reason. The parliamentarian stepped down after accidentally sharing details of a closed meeting between the Dutch queen and selected members of parliament. It was the latest in a string of embarrassing faux-pas committed by the liberal parliamentarian, who was also a known critic of his own party's leader, Mark Rutte.

Boekestijn's book deals a new blow to the position of development aid in the Dutch political landscape, which seemed unassailable until recently. For decades, the subject was taboo. Development aid was simply the civilised thing to do, or so a stable majority in Dutch politics thought. This moral tenet has been laid down in the budgetary rule that 0.8 per cent of annual GDP is to be spent on development aid. The consensus over this matter has been steadily

deteriorating in recent years however. Starting with the populist right PVV, more and more political parties have started to voice criticism of development aid.

All parties involved are nervously awaiting a report that government think tank WRR will be publishing halfway through next month. Not only will it contain an appraisal of Dutch development aid policy, the WRR will also weigh in on the fundamental international discussion regarding the principals supporting development aid.

Does aid aid?

The main question in this debate: does aid really aid? Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo sparked international controversy when she added her two cents to the discussion in the form of a bestselling book, *Dead Aid*. Moyo argues that the billions spent on aid in Africa hinder the growth of a real economy in many countries on the continent by taking away financial incentives for development. 'Free money' also relieves failing governments of the need to answer to their citizens, Moyo says.

Bert Koenders, the Dutch minister for development aid, disagrees with the Zambian economist. He feels she puts too much faith in stock and bond markets. Koenders thinks that development aid can play a "catalytic role" in economic development, making it easier for the private sector to contribute.

Parallel to this theoretical debate, a practical one rages on in the Netherlands about the numerous organisations relying on government funding to finance their projects. Earlier this year the government forced them to cooperate more, and to focus their activities on a smaller number of countries. While this move had little to do with the fundamental debate about the usefulness of development aid, Koenders can still point to it if he wants to show that he too dares question the effectiveness of aid.

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