

Stay Involved In the Worldwide Rule of Law Crisis

The Dutch parties currently negotiating a government see development cooperation as a compassionate extra or as support for our business community. But this support plays a strategic role within a broader Dutch domestic and foreign policy to achieve sustainable security and prosperity. Doing this effectively does require reform.

In many countries worldwide, the rule of law is under pressure. International indices on democracy, security, and human rights show that democratic achievements are eroding and autocratic regimes are on the rise.

Party programs of the intended Dutch coalition parties avoid these international issues and do not see a role for development cooperation, or prioritize humanitarian aid and support that only serve our interests regarding migration and trade.

Also our problem

Autocrats and conflicts elsewhere affect The Netherlands. Think of refugees reaching Europe via Libya and ending up in the Caribbean Netherlands from Venezuela, the space for IS in Niger, or the threat to trade routes in the Red Sea from Yemen and Somalia. In a polarized geopolitical landscape, it is also difficult to make agreements on shared challenges such as climate change and trade.

Support for fair justice, societal dialogue, and inclusive governance can prevent and de-escalate conflicts. Research emphasizes that 1 dollar of prevention saves 16 dollars in humanitarian aid and post-damage repairs. A resilient rule of law is also a prerequisite for progress, for example, in trade or food security.

Programs on these themes also keep a finger on the pulse of long-running societal processes. From a more cynical perspective, cuts in development cooperation lose influence 'at the table': influence that countries like China and Russia are keen to expand, especially on the African continent, with its youngest labor force in the world, a huge market and valuable resources.

More realistic expectations and a unified foreign policy

Enough reasons for Dutch government to continue investing in the rule of law elsewhere. But what can you do about it? An evaluation recently emphasized that joint Dutch efforts (defense, ODA, trade) in Afghanistan, Mali, and South Sudan contributed to peace at a local level, but not at the national level to structurally less violence.

Things should be done differently and the good news is that we know which support is more realistic and effective than the traditional 'top-down' institutional approach. Developing countries no longer accept those Western 'cut-and-paste models' and paternalism in any case.

With locally driven support that harnesses the power of civil society organizations and institutions, development cooperation strengthens a resilient network of partners – communities

and organizations – in the Global South. They take the lead in shaping their (informal) justice and governance themselves. After all, there is no recipe, but figures still show that a growing majority in Africa wants (better functioning) democracy.

Results on a national scale can only be expected with political momentum; then development cooperation can facilitate these partners along with governments to fairly and effectively organize formal justice, police, and governance. In addition to directly assisting individuals (in 2022, the Netherlands helped 729,000 people in accessing justice), the added value is also indirect.

This approach is particularly effective when further foreign policy strengthens these goals with fair trade, diplomatic efforts (e.g., the UN), climate and tax policies, or defense (e.g., stability during peace processes). This way, together with other 'donor countries', you strategically support the root causes of conflict such as inequality and exclusion. The Netherlands benefits from this in international trade, manageability of migration, security against terrorism or escalating conflicts, etc.

Appeal

The appeal to the to-be coalition parties in The Hague - the City of Justice and Peace - is therefore not to blindly focus on Dutch short-term interests such as migration and trade with development cooperation. ODA and cooperation with civil society organizations make a strategic foreign policy on peace, security, and prosperity more effective. And during a global crisis of the rule of law that affects us just as much, this is unfortunately very much needed.

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