Government Decision-Makers’ Perceptions of the Impact of Public Opinion on International Development

Findings from France, Germany, the U.K., and the U.S
The Building Support for International Development study provides a roadmap for the development community for connecting more meaningfully with key constituencies in donor-country discussions about international development policy issues and priorities. The study, launched by InterMedia in 2011 with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, included qualitative and quantitative research with three key target groups:

**INTERESTED CITIZENS**
Members of the public who are predisposed to engagement with international development issues, based on their self-reported interest in global health and international development issues, and their previous participation in activities in support of development causes (such as donating, volunteering, writing to public officials, etc.) The research included national urban surveys with 3,824 interested citizens and focus group discussions with 160 interested citizens in China, France, Germany, the U.K. and the U.S.

**INFLUENTIALS**
Citizens with the potential to influence decisions by government officials on development policies. 88 in-depth interviews were conducted with influentials in China, France, Germany, the U.K., and the U.S.

**GOVERNMENT DECISION-MAKERS**
Elected and appointed officials in government and the parliamentary committees in France, Germany, the U.K. and the U.S., who are engaged in forming, implementing and overseeing policies on international development and global health. Due to political sensitivities and time constraints, no interviews were conducted with government decision-makers in China. 40 in-depth interviews were conducted with government decision-makers in France, Germany, the U.K. and the U.S.

The Building Support study covers the four largest bi-lateral aid donors—France, Germany, the U.K. and the U.S.—as well as China, which is fast becoming a major player in the aid arena.

All research reports based on this study are available on InterMedia’s Building Support Portal at www.audiencescapes.org/buildsupport. They include:
- The main report, which covers the key findings for each of the target groups;
- Five detailed country reports;
- Four topic reports on the role of celebrities, public opinion, research organisation and non-profit organisations in international development.

This topic report focuses on the government decision-makers’ perceptions of the role of public opinion on international development and global health and the impact that it has on development policymaking. Key findings are based on 40 in-depth interviews with government decision-makers in France, Germany, the U.K., and the U.S.

For more information about the Building Support for International Development study, or to arrange a customized Building Support workshop, contact:

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II. OVERVIEW

This report focuses on the role of public opinion in the decision-making process and the extent to which it influences policymaking on development issues across the four countries. We also discuss the tools that government decision-makers use to monitor public opinion and the role that the development community plays in this process.

It is important to note that there were no substantial differences between the views expressed by elected and appointed government decision-makers. In addition, the responses given by government decision-makers were not country specific; thus the findings in this report are organised thematically rather than by country.

Overall, the vast majority of government decision-makers across the four countries agree that listening to the public's views on international development is important and use a variety of different mechanisms to do so. However, public opinion seems to have less impact on policymaking in this sector than might have been expected, and most government decision-makers perceive other factors, such as data-based evidence, as considerably more important for policymaking than public opinion.

However, to what extent, when and why is public opinion taken into account?

The answers to these questions varied and are explained in detail further in this section. It is important to note that variations occurred within and across countries, among types of decision-makers (elected and appointed), as well as across and within different development sectors (health, agriculture, microfinance, gender issues, etc.). In terms of how much attention they pay to public opinion and what kind of influence it has on their policymaking, government decision-makers can be broadly divided into two camps: active listeners, who pay attention to public opinion, but consider it much less important than other factors; and loyal followers, who regularly take public opinion into account when forming policies. Both groups are discussed in more detail in section III.
The first and the largest group regularly monitors the public’s views and concerns regarding development issues and generally agrees that increased public support for overseas spending is desirable. However, they also emphasise that public opinion is not a principle driver in their decision-making, and that other factors, such as data-based evidence, carry considerably more weight. One interviewee even noted that, while he regularly monitors public opinion, he also makes a conscious effort not to let public opinion affect his decision-making.

“Public opinion is taken on board, but it doesn’t have to be decisive for our decision-making. It is more a suggestion for political leadership.”
- (German government decision-maker)

“Certainly, the perspectives of people from outside the U.S. government influence the process, but I don’t think they drive what we do.”
- (U.S. government decision-maker)

“The power of public opinion to influence foreign aid budgets was emphasised particularly by U.S. interviewees. However, government decision-makers across the four countries agreed that public opinion generally does not influence programmatic priorities in the development sector.

“Public opinion is obviously very important. We work within a democratic system and public opinion is its integral part. However, a public decision-maker has to set a limit, try to inform the public opinion and not be too sensitive to some very short-lived movements, especially on international development issues, which require long-term strategies.”
- (French government decision-maker)

“I make an effort not to let public opinion influence me.”
- (German government decision-maker)

“I think public opinion on development in the UK well it is important in terms of framing our policies, it’s important in terms of presenting our policies.”
- (U.K. government decision-maker)

“I understand the perspectives of people from outside the U.S. government influence the process, but I don’t think they drive what we do.”
- (U.S. government decision-maker)

“Public opinion is at most in the direction of setting priorities. But that I change my position because public opinion hears a different position, not really.”
- (German government decision-maker)

But why does public opinion have less impact on policy decisions than might be expected? The key reasons appear to be four-fold and include the very nature (or perceived nature) of public opinion, the need to base policy decisions on data, the decision-makers’ sense of moral obligation to “do the right thing,” and the relatively insignificant impact of development issues on election outcomes.

The nature of public opinion

Public opinion, according to government decision-makers, is led by emotion, and is not based on facts, which is key for effective policymaking. The emotional nature of public opinion can have either a positive or a negative impact – on the one hand, it can be easily manipulated and used to undermine the support for foreign aid spending, and, on the other, its emotional character is a key driver of fundraising efforts following major natural disasters.

The key findings

Active listeners, cautious followers

III. KEY FINDINGS

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Lastly, some decision-makers feel less obligated to follow public opinion due to its ambiguity. Many struggle to understand what exactly constitutes public opinion and how to accurately measure it, which reduces their willingness to take it on board during policymaking on international development.

“I would argue that there is no single public opinion so how does one respond to a huge community, a public community of stakeholders, I don’t think you can.”
– (U.S. government decision-maker)

“If public opinion consists of a few activists, then yes, we know about them and we are interested in their point of view, and the position of their leaders on development issues. However, if by public opinion you mean 65 million French people, then I am not too sure I can tell you what exactly they are after in terms of development policy."
– (French government decision-maker)

**IMPORTANCE OF DATA-BASED EVIDENCE**

International development policies should primarily be based on robust, objective, up-to-date data and studies conducted by academic, research and other organisations. Government decision-makers noted that other factors, including public opinion, should play a secondary role.

“Evidence is more important than public opinion. We may need to do a better job of sharing better information to shape public opinion and make it more evidence-based.”
– (U.S. government decision-maker)

“Think tanks and the academia play an important role and their independent peer reviewed papers are essential.”
– (U.S. government decision-maker)

**TAKING THE MORAL LEAD**

Some government decision-makers neglect public opinion on international development if they believe it opposes their priorities. They note the government has to take the moral lead and make decisions they consider right for the country, even if they are not in line with public opinion.

“We are going to do the right thing in terms of what needs to be done in the country. Public opinion is not going to influence policy in that way.”
– (U.S. government decision-maker)

“The problem is we are in difficult economic times, so people are now worried about paying their bills, whether they are going to have a job, and (foreign aid) is, understandably, lower on the public’s priority list. And the government is keeping its commitment and taking a moral stance about maintaining the aid level, which I think is absolutely the right thing to do.”
– (U.K. government decision-maker)

**INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT NOT AN ELECTION “DEAL-BREAKER”**

International development is not seen as a key election issue, which makes elected government decision-makers in particular less motivated to follow public opinion in this area. This issue is not an election “deal-breaker,” noted one of the U.K. government decision-makers, and taking favourable positions does not help to win votes. On the other hand, policymakers tend to pay much closer attention to public opinion on domestic topics, which have a considerable influence on election outcomes, particularly during an economic downturn.

“Quite frankly you do not gain any points or win elections with a certain position in international development. It is rather the opposite.”
– (German government decision-maker)

“Apart from humanitarian crises, international development will never be a top 10 issue for anyone, when you knock on doors during elections.”
– (U.K. government decision-maker)

**Loyal followers of public opinion**

The minority camp includes decision-makers who believe that public opinion on development issues has a significant impact on their decision-making. They usually take it on board out of a sense of duty, or to prevent public backlash at a later stage, when the policies have already been put in place.

This group, which includes both appointed and elected decision-makers, generally felt it was their responsibility, as representatives of the public, to ensure that the views of the electorate are taken into account when forming policies on any issue that involves spending taxpayers’ money. Some also emphasised the importance of listening to public opinion, particularly in the early stage of policy development, in order to prevent the implementation of unpopular policies and increase the political legitimacy of government decisions.

“My personal philosophy as a civil servant is that the public have entrusted us with a lot of money, and part of the covenant with that trust is that we really have to deliver against their expectations.”
– (U.K. government decision-maker)

“As a politician I am a deputy of the people and as such I should be interested in public opinion.”
– (German government decision-maker)

“It is important for politicians in a democracy to always reach out and listen to public opinion, because without broad public consent a policy will not survive very long.”
– (U.K. government decision-maker)
Government decision-makers across all four countries regularly assess public opinion on issues pertaining to budget allocation on international development, primarily by tracking mainstream media coverage.


WHERE PUBLIC PRESSURE HAS MADE A DIFFERENCE
Interviewees cited several examples of issues they believe have benefited from public pressure in the past. In France, for example, some interviewees noted that public opinion played an important role in bringing HIV/AIDS to the forefront of the government’s development agenda. It also influenced government’s tackling of international debt and policies aimed at improving access to healthcare in developing countries.

HIV/AIDS was also highlighted as an issue that benefited from favourable public opinion in the U.S. As a result of public pressure, noted one interviewee, the U.S. government increased the allocated public funds to tackle the issue.

Campaigns and initiatives, such as Make Poverty History and Drop the Debt, were also mentioned as effective in mobilising the wider public and increasing the pressure on decision-makers to push development issues higher on the government agenda.

Public opinion polls are also recognised as an important tool for better understanding citizens’ perceptions and attitudes, but they are not used regularly, primarily due to financial constraints. Moreover, reduced budgets have forced some government decision-makers, particularly in the U.K., to abolish regular research into public opinion and instead rely on the studies conducted by NGOs, think tanks and other development organisations (see Section 3 for further details).

“We are no longer allowed to do polling, but we used to.”
- (U.K. government decision-maker)

“We have an information department that synthesises public opinion on development. I would say that this was something done more by the last government than the current one, which is trying to cut expenditure in this area.”
- (U.K. government decision-maker)
Other mechanisms for tracking public opinion include direct feedback from the citizens obtained through letters or emails and face-to-face contact during various public events. A U.S. government decision-maker also mentioned collecting the public’s feedback via their organisation’s Facebook page.

“I do regular Meet your MP events in my constituency—probably got one every couple of week.”
– (U.K. government decision-maker)

“Most of our embassies have Facebook pages which invite comments and we get a fair amount of feedback that way.”
– (U.S. government decision-maker)

“You get a lot of post from the citizens and I also hold public events on these subjects, where it comes to respective conversations. This way you get a really good insight into which questions need to be answered.”
– (German government decision-maker)

Government decision-makers’ appetites for research-based insights combined with falling budgets present the development community with an opportunity to strengthen collaboration with policy-makers by supporting them with robust research that helps them obtain a deeper understanding of public views on international development. Due to substantial budget cuts, many government decision-makers already rely on research provided by international NGOs, think tanks and other organisations. However, they are looking for a more regular collaboration and supply of data that helps them gauge public attitudes in their countries, and assess and address the misperceptions and gaps in their citizens’ knowledge on international development and global health.

“Our budget for polling has been cut to zero. We used to do a lot of polling ourselves before 2010 and that told us quite a lot about where the public was and how it was changing. However, we do get polling information from the NGOs, the big NGOs—Save the Children and Oxfam. Occasionally, Number 10 does some polling and we do follow what’s going on in the letters pages to try and get a sense of that. I think our sense of what the public thinks is not as good as it was two years ago.”
– (German government decision-maker)

Second, if government decision-makers perceive the general public as ill-informed and too emotional, they put significantly more value on views and concerns expressed by the part of the public they consider better informed and knowledgeable about development issues. These opinions, they note, are typically expressed through think tanks, universities, NGOs and certain advocacy groups. Unlike broad public opinion, they believe these views are more likely to be based on sound arguments and evidence, not on emotions, and are thus considerably more likely to be taken into account in the policymaking process than the general public opinion.
ABOUT INTERMEDIA

InterMedia (www.intermedia.org) is a global research and consulting group providing strategic guidance and insight on effective engagement and networking strategies online and offline. A not-for-profit social enterprise, InterMedia equips clients to communicate and connect effectively with communities worldwide.

Based in Nairobi, Kenya; Washington, D.C.; and London, U.K.; InterMedia has worked in more than 100 developing countries. InterMedia research experts use innovative techniques to understand how information, communication and media resources can deliver impact.


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