

BULLETIN

No. 104 (437) • November 8, 2012 • © PISM

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Poland's Development Cooperation in Africa: Limits and Opportunities

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Africa has never been a top priority for Polish development assistance, which focuses more on the Eastern European countries due to their proximity and historic ties. Despite important constraints, there are still several options available to increase the quality and quantity of Polish aid on the continent. By targeting bilateral aid more strategically and employing new multilateral mechanisms of aid delivery, such as delegated cooperation or multilateral programmes, Poland could make its presence in Africa more visible and could secure better relations with the emerging economies of the future.

The State of Play. Africa lags the other developed continents in Millennium Development Goal achievements even though it has traditionally been the largest beneficiary of international Official Development Assistance (ODA). Between 2000–2009, it received 42% of all aid from members of the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD (DAC-OECD). Many donors directed even more ODA to Africa in the same period: Ireland, 82%; France, 70%; Sweden, 50%. Also, new emerging donors such as China, India or Brazil have directed more aid to Africa in recent years. The continent is of prime concern to the EU as well, and between 2000–2009 it targeted 49% of its ODA to the continent. According to the European Consensus on Development, the EU Member States were expected to direct half of their additional increases in aid after 2005 to sub-Saharan Africa.

However, Africa has enormous economic opportunities, with average annual GDP growth at 4.6% between 2000 and 2009. The share of people living in extreme poverty (below \$1.25 a day, according to the World Bank) in sub-Saharan Africa decreased from 58% in 1990 to 51% in 2005. Thanks to internal reforms in some places (i.e., Ghana, Rwanda and Ethiopia) or expanded exploration for and export of natural resources (Angola, Uganda), several states are emerging as future economic powers. While the development needs of many sub-Saharan African countries are still huge, there is the opportunity that development cooperation will soon be replaced by mutually profitable economic cooperation. Thus, many foreign donors are already blending their assistance with commercial activities (i.e., mixing grants and loans) in the hope that aid will eventually pay off as investment.

Poland's Aid to Africa. Poland has no significant political and economic interests in Africa and a very limited presence on the continent. In 2011, trade with African countries amounted to nearly \$3.5 billion, which was merely 0.86% of total Polish trade. After the reorganisation of its diplomatic missions in 2009, Poland now has only five embassies for all 48 sub-Saharan African countries. Africa has not played a major role in Polish development policy, which traditionally has been more focused on Eastern Europe and Afghanistan. In 2011, sub-Saharan Africa received only 4.8 million PLN (€1.2 million) of Polish ODA, or 1.8% of the total amount. In effect, Poland transfers its assistance to the continent mainly through multilateral channels, such as its contributions to the EU budget and the European Development Fund (since 2011, including €32 million in the first year) as well as via other international organisations. Nevertheless, two African countries were considered high priority partners for Polish aid in recent years (Angola in 2004–2011, and Tanzania in 2007–2008). Africa is also the most preferred destination for official assistance, according to opinion polls in which 59% of Poles support aid for Africa, in comparison to the 25% in favour of helping Poland's eastern neighbours or the 17% who support aid to Asian states.

Poland's Multiannual Development Cooperation Programme (MDCP) for 2012–2015 introduced important changes in the country's approach to Africa, recognising two North African states (Tunisia and Libya) and eight countries from Eastern Africa (Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia,

South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda) as high geographical priority areas. Although aid to Arab countries will focus on assistance to economic and political transformation, cooperation with sub-Saharan Africa concentrates on four sectors: education, environmental protection, health, and social and professional activation. So the broad allocation of Polish aid to Africa was the result of compromise between national interests (the prioritisation of Eastern Europe and support for Arab Spring nations) and international expectations and pressure from some Polish NGOs advocating more aid to Africa. It seems apparent, however, that this fragmentation of the country's modest development aid resources over as vast an area as eight sub-Saharan countries will limit their impact. There might also be technical problems with properly monitoring the work and completion of development projects in sub-Saharan Africa as Poland has only two embassies in the whole region (Kenya and Ethiopia).

Options for the Future. Polish aid to Africa is constrained not only by a modest aid budget but also by the small number of development staff in Polish embassies and their relatively limited expertise and contacts in partner countries. The programme for 2012 allocated merely 5.2 million PLN (€1.2 million) to the whole of East Africa and just 1 million PLN (€200,000) to North Africa. Similarly, human resources dedicated to development issues will never match those of other Western donors. For example, while the Danish aid agency has about 25 specialists in Uganda alone, there is only one person—in the Polish Embassy in Kenya—overseeing assistance to several Eastern African countries. Moreover, limited historical links and knowledge about the continent further hamper Poland's room for action. Despite these shortcomings, if there was the political will, there would be several options for Poland to improve development cooperation with Africa.

First, Poland may still strengthen bilateral channels of aid delivery. Several Polish NGOs and religious institutions already have enough experience and capacity to effectively activate bigger development projects with local partners. A substantial increase in the budget for a Small Grant Scheme run by the Polish embassies could help them to directly approach civil society groups and improve the visibility of Poland. Similarly, making more scholarship slots in Poland available for African students seems to be a better-targeted way of spending limited resources. Furthermore, it is worth exploring the possibilities to engage Polish private companies in bigger development projects.

Second, Poland may engage with existing donor coordination groups in the high priority countries and use more multilateral mechanisms such as delegated cooperation and trust funds. These aid modalities do not absorb much in the way of human resources but can give Poland an insight into how development programmes in Africa function and allow it to strengthen cooperation with other donors to prepare future activities more strategically. For example, Poland, which puts a high priority on democracy support in external aid, may be interested in joining the Democratic Governance Facility in Uganda, a programme run by eight European partners and aimed at strengthening democracy and human rights in the country.

Besides the sectoral priorities for East Africa defined in the MDCP, some African states may also be interested in learning from the Polish experiences in democratic transformation, its regional integration and its history of being a beneficiary of foreign aid. It is important thus to strengthen dialogues with partner governments and other donors about possible niches or areas of common interest to properly use Poland's comparative advantages. Any problem arising from not having enough personnel in the field to cover the extra tasks may be addressed by hiring local staff or outsourcing work to external experts or NGOs.

Conclusions. Although Eastern Europe will remain a top priority area for Polish development cooperation, there are enough reasons and possibilities to direct more aid to Africa. This is the aid destination not only recommended by the EU but also largely preferred by Polish society. Although the recent MDCP recognised the importance of Africa, it may need some adjustments to target aid more strategically. Hence, the next few years can serve to test Polish capacities and opportunities to narrow its post-2015 activities on two or three countries where Polish aid can have the greatest impact. Although whether there is a diplomatic mission in a partner country must be taken into account when choosing development partners, other equally important factors should be the country's needs and the availability of aid modalities (i.e., delegated cooperation, sectoral support).

For a country like Poland, development cooperation may also be seen as a useful instrument to mark its presence on the emerging economies of the continent and pave the way for closer relations with partner countries in order to create access to these African markets. The stronger involvement of the private sector in aid programmes is coherent with emerging trends in international development cooperation and may help to secure extra funds for Africa. If Poland does not want to miss business opportunities in the future, it should explore opportunities that arise from development cooperation with Africa.