

Americans on Foreign Aid and World Hunger

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In 1995, the Program on International Policy Attitudes found that, while an overwhelming majority supported aid in principle, a majority wanted to cut it. However when asked to estimate how much of the budget was devoted to foreign aid, respondents vastly overestimated its size, and when asked what would be appropriate they proposed an amount far higher than the actual amount. In this 2001 study PIPA sought to find out how perceptions and attitudes about aid have evolved in the interim.

In addition, this study sought to explore in greater depth public attitudes on the problem of world hunger. How do Americans feel about the altruistic purpose of addressing the problem of hunger per se, as compared to using aid to pursue purposes more directly related to a traditional concept of the national interest? The countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development -- a consortium of the 29 most economically developed countries -- have set the goal of cutting world hunger in half by 2015. How do Americans feel about pursuing such a goal, and would they be willing to incur the necessary costs? How do Americans feel about sending aid to Africa, given that many analysts feel that the United States has few vital interests in that region?

Other issues were also addressed. Would respondents confirm the widespread view that the American public responds emotionally to images of suffering, but is not really willing to make the long-term commitment to economic development? How do Americans feel about the growing emphasis on channeling aid money through private charitable organizations?

To address these and other questions, PIPA conducted a multipart study. It consisted of:

- A review of polling by other organizations conducted since 1995.
- Focus groups conducted in Baltimore, Maryland; San Mateo, California; Richmond, Virginia; and Cleveland, Ohio.
- A nationwide poll with a random sample of 901 Americans conducted November 1-6 weighted to be demographically representative.. The margin of error ranged from +/- 3.5-4% depending on the portion of the sample that heard the question.

FINDINGS

Opposition to Aid Down

1. Over the last few years there has been a marked decrease in the public's desire to cut foreign aid (so that it is now a minority position), while an overwhelming majority continues to support the principle of giving foreign aid. This increased support for foreign aid has occurred even though there has been no decline in the public's extreme overestimation of the amount of the federal budget that goes to foreign aid.

Public Still Vastly Overestimates Amount of Aid

2. When asked how much should be devoted to aid, the majority continues to propose an amount far higher than the actual amount, and only a small minority regards the actual current level as excessive. Addressing the problem of the poor at home continues to be a higher priority than the poor abroad, but the majority favors a greater proportion of spending on the poor abroad than the actual proportion.

Strong Support for Hunger Aid

3. Overwhelming majorities are supportive of efforts to alleviate hunger and poverty -- much more so than for foreign aid overall. Giving aid to gain strategic influence is far less popular. Consistent with the low concern for gaining strategic influence, a strong majority prefers to give aid through multilateral institutions rather than bilaterally.

Strong Support for Program to Cut Hunger in Half

4. Overwhelming majorities support a multilateral effort to cut hunger in half by the year 2015 and say that they would be willing to pay for the costs of such a program. However, most do not think that the average American would be as willing to pay the necessary costs, and a slight majority thinks that the Europeans and Japanese would not be willing to do their part.

High Level of Support for Aid to Africa

5. Consistent with the strong concern for hunger and poverty, support for aid to Africa is very high.

Support for Development Aid

6. Strong majorities support the idea that the United States should not only try to help alleviate hunger, but should also address the long-term goal of helping poor countries develop their economies. Support is derived from long-term self-interest as well as moral considerations. Programs that emphasize education, and helping women and girls are popular.

Significant Reservations About Aid Remain

7. Concurrent with support for many aid programs, support for foreign aid per se is lukewarm due to a variety of problems Americans perceive in U.S. aid programs, especially a lack of effectiveness and the siphoning off of aid money by corrupt officials. These perceptions may contribute to the public's incorrect belief that world hunger is increasing.

Support for Giving Aid Through Private Charitable Organizations

8. Strong majorities support channeling aid money through private charitable organizations and believe that it will be much more effective.