

Americans Support Spending Increases to Meet Millennium Development Goals

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But Only If Other Developed Countries Do Their Part

By Steven Kull

At the UN World Summit this week, a major focus of discussion will be an assessment of how the developed countries are doing in meeting the Millennium Developmental Goals agreed on in 2000. These call for meeting eight key development goals—such as reducing hunger by half, providing basic sanitation throughout the world—by the year 2015.

Would the American public support the US doing its part in meeting such goals? To do so would require significant increases in development aid. Estimates of the cost have varied from \$39 billion per year (to focus on extreme poverty alone), to around \$60 billion (to pursue all the goals interdependently), or into the \$80 billion range (assuming major errors in estimates and execution). Allocated, this equals approximately \$15, \$30 or \$50 per taxpaying household in the US.

Earlier polling has found that while Americans support the idea of giving aid to needy countries in principle, they resist increasing the amount the US spends on aid. Some of this resistance is derived from extreme overestimations of the actual amount of the budget that goes to aid. But even when asked about increasing beyond the actual amount, majorities do not favor it.

However, a PIPA-Knowledge Networks poll reveals that most Americans would support increased spending to fund the Millennium Development Goals. The poll, conducted in June of this year, found that even when Americans were asked to assume that the costs would be as much as “\$50 a year per taxpaying household,” 70% said they would favor it. Democrats were only slightly more likely to approve than Republicans.

What is it about this question about participation in the MDG effort that elicits such a new-found generosity? The question included a key proviso that “other countries were willing to give this much” as well. In general, the only poll questions that elicit clear majority support for increased spending on aid are ones that involve US participation in a multilateral effort in which other developed countries are doing their part.

This same pattern was found in response to a question about whether the US should commit to spend seven-tenths of one percent of its GDP to address world poverty, especially in Africa. Sixty-five percent of Americans favored the US making such a

commitment provided, again, that “other wealthy countries are willing to make this commitment” as well.

So why is this so important to Americans? Some of it is derived from a general enthusiasm for working collectively. Asked by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations in summer 2004 what kind of the role the US should play in the world, only 8% said “the US should continue to be the preeminent world leader in solving international problems,” but only 10% said the US should withdraw from most efforts to solve international problems.” Rather, 78% said the US “should do its share in efforts to solve international problems together with other countries.”

But the concern about others pulling their weight is also prompted by the belief that the US perennially does more than its share. Earlier polling has shown that most Americans assume that as a percentage of GNP, the US gives substantially more than other developed countries. This is an incorrect assumption—as a percentage of GNP the US has one of the lowest rates of giving among developed countries. But such beliefs are powerful. Americans do not like the feeling that other countries are sitting back while the US is being the patsy.

When suffering is intense and vividly portrayed in the news, Americans override these considerations. After the tsunami in Asia, Americans willingly opened their wallets, irrespective of what other countries did.

But to sustain support for a long-term program such as the Millennium Development Goals, it is critical for Americans to believe other countries are doing their part. Americans are concerned about world poverty. When they believe others are doing their part in a collective effort to address it, large majorities enthusiastically support the US joining in.