The (ir)relevance of investing in citizen engagement for development cooperation

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Background

This study examines both how investment in citizen engagement evolved between 1987 and 2023 and whether political commitment (ODA spending), investment in citizen engagement and societal support (attitudes) form a mutually reinforcing relationship across countries and over time. The analysis uses data from Eurobarometer and OECD DAC for 23 European countries[1]. It identifies patterns and relationships, but cannot establish cause and effect. These questions are particularly relevant at a time when political support for development cooperation is under increasing pressure and societal support can no longer simply be taken for granted.

Citizen engagement has lost ground

From the 1970s onwards, informing and engaging citizens was explicitly emphasised as an important part of development cooperation. From the 1990s, this importance was also expressed in financial ambitions, with recommendations proposing that 2–3% of aid budgets be devoted to this purpose as a non-binding commitment. Since the late 2000s, investment in citizen engagement has lost ground.

−51% Average development awareness spending per capita fell from USD 1.74 in 2009 to USD 0.85 in 2023.

However, spending varies greatly between countries: in 2023, Luxembourg spent USD 6.83 per capita compared with just USD 0.014 in the Netherlands.

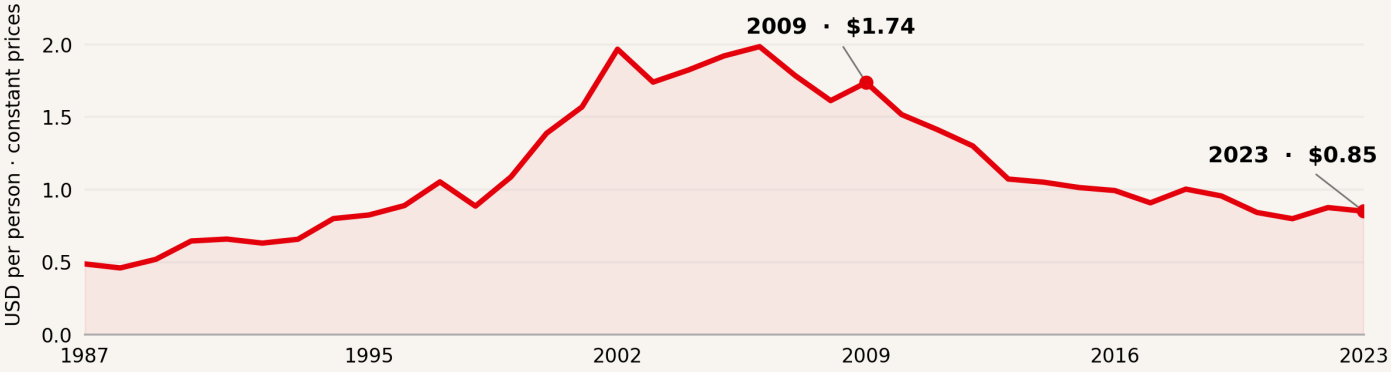

Figure 1. Based on OECD CRS and World Bank data, 1987–2023 for total of 23 included countries. Percentage change calculated from unrounded values.

Budgets do not move together

Investment in engaging citizens has lost ground, while political commitment (ODA budget) has been considerably more stable.

Support can no longer be taken for granted

Support remains considerable, but has become less pronounced, with a shift from stronger towards more moderate expressions of support (1991–2019). More recent data also suggest that support is increasingly contested, although levels and trends differ between countries.

[1] Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Data availability varies by country and indicator.

There is no single European pathway

Political commitment, investment in engaging citizens and societal support are related, but they are distinct and do not consistently move together. In some countries, higher investment goes hand in hand with higher public support; in others, higher investment even coincides with lower levels of public support, contrary to what might be expected.

How spending and support move together

Positive correlation $r > 0.2$	Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Portugal, United Kingdom
Weak or no correlation $-0.2 \leq r \leq 0.2$	Italy, Czech Republic, Sweden, Luxembourg
Negative correlation $r < -0.2$	Austria, Belgium, Finland, Spain

Support indicator, Eurobarometer: Perceived importance of helping people in developing countries. Five survey years: 2004, 2009, 2011, 2014 and 2019. Data are available for 14 countries included in the study.

What can we conclude?

The substantial decline in investment shows how citizen engagement has lost ground within development cooperation. The findings show that the outcomes of citizen engagement are less predictable than we often hope. This reinforces the need to be cautious about treating citizen engagement as a predictable instrument for producing particular attitudes or forms of support.

Instead, building on the findings, we suggest bringing the why of citizen engagement back to the centre. The findings invite us to (re)consider investment in citizen engagement as a responsibility in its own right: creating space for citizens to be informed, question, contribute to, and help shape development cooperation. This means recognising citizen engagement as part of the core responsibilities of civil society organisations and governments, linked to their role in shaping and carrying out development cooperation.

Such engagement may contribute to greater understanding, solidarity and support, and these remain important outcomes to work towards and monitor for, but they cannot be assumed or guaranteed. This becomes particularly important at a time when both the why and the how of development cooperation are changing rapidly.

Source: Kinsbergen, S., Rana, Z., & Sneijers, N. (2026). The (Ir)relevance of Investing in Citizen Engagement for Development Cooperation: Evidence from 23 European Countries. Radboud Universiteit.