

WHY DOES BD UNDERTAKE POLITICAL ACTION?

1. Why invest in political action?

Do organisations like BD have to limit themselves to development projects in the South? It is without a doubt their core activity, nevertheless, BD also has a fundamental mission to tackle the structural causes of poverty and underdevelopment. This is not a mission the organisation has chosen for itself, it is due to clear and often repeated demands by the partner organisations in the South: if one really wants to be a partner – and as such more than a middleman for funding – one has to take more responsibility in the North. Consequently, we **inform people and create awareness** about issues affecting the South. Furthermore, we **influence policy makers** so that they make decisions that are beneficial for the South.

Political decisions can have far-reaching consequences for the South. That is why the political dimension is an integral part of BD's work.

2. Structures promoting injustice

Poverty is a complex problem. It is predominantly caused by underlying injustice and is a structural issue since it is widespread and kept in place by certain stakeholders. The 'structures promoting injustice' hamper our partner organisations' battle against poverty and injustice. In the following paragraphs, we will expand on a few examples of the structures that promote injustice and cause poverty.



2.1. Social structures

The social structure of a country might sometimes reinforce poverty. When a society regards a certain section of the population as inferior, for example on the basis of origin or sex; this group of people will find it difficult to get out of poverty. For example, in India the wide gap between the impoverished Indian population and the well-to-do middle class is in part caused by the traditional caste system. Discrimination based on gender is also a deeply entrenched structural obstacle for individuals' development. Many women throughout the world are poorer than men because they get less access to education, inheritance, nutrition and even life itself. In India, for example, a disproportionate amount of abortions or infanticides occur among girls.

2.2. Government

The population of countries with a weak government finds it extremely hard to fight injustice because they have no governmental structures to rely on.



For example in the Democratic Republic of Congo public-sector corruption is a structural obstacle against the social mobility of ordinary people. A trader of palm tree oil can barely make a living because he has to pay so many so called 'taxes' or bribes to civil servants, who themselves are trying to find a way out as the weak state structure is not able to pay them regularly or sufficiently.

In some Latin American countries the government blocks the local population from demanding their rights in relation to multinational mining companies exploiting their territory, by making social protests illegal.

2.3. Conflict structures

Underdevelopment is more often than not the consequence of an armed conflict. Wars and military occupations severely damage the human and economic potential of the area in which they occur and they absorb resources that could normally be used to fight poverty, develop agriculture and reinforce society. Armed conflicts often go hand in hand with large scale violations of international humanitarian and human rights. When these violations become systematic, they create a spiral of violence that sustains the conflict. A typical example of this is the conflict between Israel and Palestine.



Israel occupies Palestinian territories and has been abusing its control over the region for decades. By annexing and confiscating Palestinian land, building Israeli settlements, constructing the Wall and institutionalising limits on the freedom of movement, Israel is violating the basic principles of occupation law. Israel's policy of 'facts on the ground' is hard to overcome and turns the idea of an independent and liveable Palestinian state into an increasingly utopian idea. This lack of political future for Palestinians undermines peace talks and boosts the popularity of extremist groups.

2.4. International structures

- International organisations:



The policies of international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) have immense consequences for the South.

These organisations strive to develop increased economic growth in order to fight poverty. However, the conditions they set for developing countries are such that, in some cases, the ability of the country to achieve its own plans is likely to be pushed aside. The dominant position held by the large

international financial organisations (IFOs) in relation to the delegations from poor countries during negotiations is itself a form of injustice.

- Multinational companies:

The arrival of the subsidiaries of large companies (so-called multinationals) in various countries often has a detrimental influence on the local population in the South. Since these multinationals have a lot of resources, they hold a strong negotiating position compared to weak governments or governments with huge debts. Because of this they manage to perform economic activities under conditions which are unprofitable to the host country, or where social and environmental laws are less vigorous or less vigorously applied than in their home countries. In some cases they might achieve a monopoly in sectors that traditionally provide a source of income for the local population. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, we can see that in the mining sector, natural resources are virtually stolen by the multinationals, causing the local communities to miss out on enormous profits. Furthermore, it is often the impoverished population who pays a heavy price in the form of deteriorating environment and health.

- Economic and political interests:

Structural injustice on an international level is kept in existence by economic and political interests.

The Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) are often used as an example. These treaties lay down the principles of trade relations between the European Union (EU) and individual ACP-countries (Africa, Caribbean and Pacific). These countries benefit from a unique cooperation with the EU, however, these trade agreements had to be revised as they did not conform to World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules. That's the reason for the new EPAs. According to critics the (limited) rights enjoyed by the ACP-countries will worsen. The principle of equality,

from which the EPAs are a departure, appears to be fair in theory but it can only be so in practice if all players on the field have the same chance of scoring. This is obviously not the case when vulnerable economies and weak governments have to negotiate with the economic super-power of the EU.

Political interests can be seen in administration of temporary relief: it is sometimes not sent to the areas in greatest need, but to areas that get more attention or have greater geopolitical importance.

- Trans-border injustice:



In addition, global problems are often felt more keenly in the South. Climate change is one such problem that exists on a trans-border scale, but the burdens it causes are not equally shared. Although the North is largely responsible for climate change due to their massive emissions of greenhouse gases, it will not, relatively speaking, suffer as many disadvantages. Most countries in the South emit relatively few greenhouse gases. Nevertheless, it is predominantly these countries who suffer the consequences of climate change and who have to pay the price of the social and ecological effects of the climate crisis. As a result, the relationship with nature that

indigenous communities in the Bolivian Altiplano have enjoyed for centuries has been disturbed by global warming. The weather has become unpredictable, causing harvests to fail more often and causing the loss of seeds for sowing. As a result of this, indigenous communities live under constant threat of a food crisis.

Who?

1. Who undertakes political action?

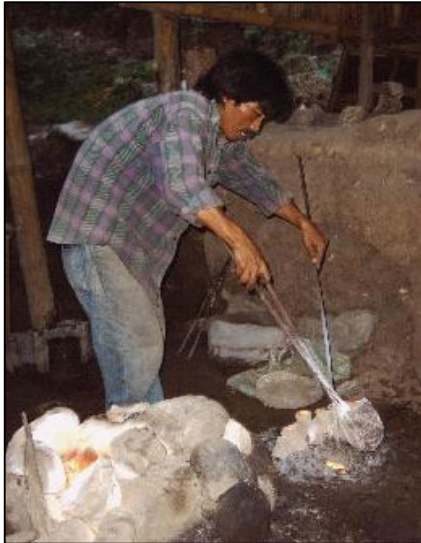
1.1. BD's Advocacy Department

The Advocacy Department's team drives all of BD's political action. Its legitimacy and power to address national and international policy makers comes from its cooperation with partners and BD's campaigns. Its purpose is to influence policy with respect to all areas that are important to the South so that people there get a decent chance to achieve their plans.

The Advocacy Department is made up of four co-workers working on certain themes. We choose these (geographically and thematically) to attain the best possible results. Therefore, we predominantly focus on the Democratic Republic of Congo, Israel-Palestine, and sustained rural development.

The Advocacy Department collaborates closely with various national and international networks to enhance its strength. That is why we are an active member of CIDSE, an international alliance of catholic solidarity organisations that promote, amongst other things, a common advocacy policy in areas such as sustained financing of development, food security, climate change, and commercial enterprise with consideration for social issues. In addition, we also collaborate with Eurac, Pax Christi, the European Network on Central Africa, and with CoE-H or Coordination Europe – Haiti, a lobbying network of European NGOs for Haiti.

1.2. Our partner organisations in the South



BD's partner organisations in the South carry out a large proportion of the political work. Human rights organisations, as well as communities and local groups, have their say in national or regional policy, for example in relation to agriculture and trade or programmes to fight poverty. BD purposely supports the political activities of a lot of its partner organisations because it regards these actions as indispensable for a structural solution to the problems in the South.

One example is the Legal Rights and Natural Resources Centre (LRC) in the Philippines. This centre condemns mining by multinationals and issues warnings about the damage caused to the ecosystem and local farming communities. The LRC communicates with the population through large scale publicity campaigns, provides legal assistance to the local populations and conducts research into the consequences of mining and alternative ways to improve the situation.

INADES-Formation in West-Africa is active in political lobbying, and cooperation with the farmers' movement, unions and the church. They work hard against the introduction of genetically modified crops that have not been researched sufficiently enough to determine whether or not they could damage food security, health and biodiversity. In addition, INADES stand up for the rights of small farmers in Burkina Faso who are being put out of business due to cheap imported food that has been dumped by Western countries.



1.3. BD's international programmes department

Our partner organisations undertaking political action are supported directly by BD's delegates in the South through our international programmes department.

- Programme officer: each region in the South has an individual coach in the head office in Brussels who is responsible for that particular region, maintains contact with the various partner organisations, and coordinates the support offered to the partner organisations.
- BD local representatives: are the link between partner organisations in the South and BD in the North. BD local representatives live and work in a particular region in the South for a period of five years maximum.
- (Overseas) development workers: these are temporary co-workers or volunteers who offer their expertise to a partner organisation in the South for a maximum period of two years. As such, (overseas) development workers are sometimes deployed to partner organisations who undertake political work.

1.4. Volunteers

The dedication of volunteers during the campaign cannot be underestimated when it comes to political action. They have an important role in creating public awareness about certain themes. For example, during the 2005 campaign hundreds of volunteers collected signatures in order to remind politicians of the fact that not enough had been done to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. These are eight goals to greatly reduce poverty in the world. The international community has committed to achieve them by 2015.

Volunteers also work to support the political work done by BD. For example, the dozens of presentations done free of charge each year by volunteers who go to Israel and the Palestinian territories on a Peace Pilgrimage with BD. They help to inform the public and raise awareness about the Israel-Palestine conflict.

How?

Two words often used in relation to political action are lobbying and advocacy. They are often intermingled. Although they both have the same goal, creating political change, both practices are in fact different.

1. Lobbying: influencing policies

By lobbying we mean directly influencing relevant policy makers, often concentrating on a specific theme. Contact with politicians and policy co-workers can be both formal and informal in nature and can be conducted both by the population affected as well as its representatives.

A concrete example of this is the seminar on European aid to the Palestinian territories that took place in Brussels in November 2008. The CIDSE's work group for Palestine-Israel organised this meeting to make national and European policy makers aware of the existing problems through workshops led by experts. Educating policy makers in this way should enable them to specialise in this area and actively cooperate towards achieving a more efficient and coherent EU policy on the Middle East.

2. Advocacy: Informing and creating awareness

Advocacy is a broader concept, involving the creation of political awareness on a certain theme. By making the general public aware and through campaigns, a larger group of people can be informed of our vision and points of view. This social basis can support direct political lobbying. Capacity building is also considered a form of advocacy. This enables partner organisations in the South to perform their own political action.

In addition to directly lobbying the collaborators of the Advocacy Department, as well as other departments within BD, the partner organisations and volunteers perform advocacy themselves. Awareness and general mobilisation of our themes is achieved through presentations, providing information to the media, publishing informative brochures or studies, undertaking action, capacity building, etc. Large-scale actions are often conducted in collaboration with other NGOs working towards the same goals.

Advocacy in practice



An example of advocacy performed by BD is the 'A just share for the Congo'-campaign in 2007. More than a hundred organisations signed this appeal by BD and other NGOs. Through this appeal we asked the Congolese government to revise unjust mining contracts and reorganise the government which was created in politically unstable times. The Congolese government agreed to this in 2007 and, after an inquiry, declared it would revise or abolish more than 60 contracts.

Geographical and thematic choices

In order to attain the best possible results with limited resources, we have to make certain choices when it comes to our political action. The Advocacy Department predominantly works on two large regions (the Democratic Republic of Congo and Israel-Palestine) and one theme (sustainable rural development). Why have we made these particular choices?

1. Central Africa

1.1. Why?

First of all, Belgian involvement and historical relations with the former colony of the Democratic Republic of Congo have played an important part in this choice. Central Africa is a region that has been ravaged for years by violent conflicts: the subsequent wars in Eastern Congo have the same mortality rate as World War Two.

In addition, BD's own history is linked to the Congo. The threat of a famine among the displaced Baluba population in the Kasai was the reason for the first Lent fund-raising appeal in 1961. Cardinal Van Roey made a connection between the dedication of Lent and financial support to a people in need. That's how BD came into being.

In this way, BD has build up valuable expertise on the Congo. This adds legitimacy and quality to the support it gives to political action for the Congo.

1.2. What?

Resolving the causes of conflict is one of the main goals of BD's political action in Central Africa.

Despite the disconcerting news stories about the constant violence, rapes and murders amongst Congolese civilians, the Congo more often than not disappears from the international radar. That is why our political policy co-workers regularly organise round table conferences inviting Belgian and European politicians in order to remind them of their promises, for example relating to the fate of women in Eastern Congo.



Natural resources are often the cause for lasting conflicts. We are trying to change the current forms of mineral robbery into sustainable and well managed mining so that the Congolese people, and the development of the country can benefit from it. We do this by exposing the practices of unscrupulous companies and encouraging the Congolese government to make better accords with commercial companies.

We also focus on reinforcing the state and democracy in the Congo. For example, by taking part in observation missions during the elections to ensure that the population can chose its leaders through honest procedures or by strengthening the social structure to advance the processes of democratisation, decentralisation and the participation of citizens.

2. Israel-Palestine

2.1. Why?

The conflict between Israel and Palestine has been a bone of contention for the world for decades and has been the focus of international attention for years. Several countries across the world are involved in the conflict and all have a different standpoint as to its solution. This is due in part to the geopolitical importance of the region, the importance of the actors involved and the religious connotations linked to the conflict. The region is the central point of several world religions which makes the area of important value. The conflict therefore not only stirs the emotions of Jews and Muslims, but of people all around the world, particularly since it is a breeding ground for extremism and terrorism. Christians are also very sensitive to anything that happens in the Holy Land, a fact that cannot be ignored by BD as a catholic inspired organisation. But there is more.

BD regards the Israel-Palestine conflict as a typical example of what happens when respect for international law becomes less important than interests, both to the parties in conflict and to the international community. The Israeli occupation policy destroys the right to self determination and the development of the population as a whole. Encouraging development, in this particular case, means fighting injustice. This can be done in the region itself as well as outside the region by undertaking political action and convincing policy makers that respect for international law is a condition for sustainable peace.

2.2. What?

Respect for international law forms the basis for our political action in the region. Israel is bound by it, but so is the European Union. Amongst other things we focus on the aid provided by the EU to the Palestinian territories. Ever since the beginning of the peace process the EU has concentrated on financial and material support. The crucial factors impeding Palestinian development, the Israeli occupation and the systematic violation of international humanitarian and human law, were overlooked. BD is constantly calling on the EU not only to provide funding, but to also play a political role and make sure international law is observed. Only in this way can the conditions for a liveable and developed Palestinian state be created.



Enhancing justice is a very important goal of our work in Israel-Palestine. A good example is the campaign 'Your head against the Wall'. During this campaign thousands of volunteers had their picture taken while they were sticking their head through a hole in a wall. The purpose of this initiative was to create public awareness and to provoke our government into putting legal advice by the International Court of Justice into action. This advice stipulates that the Wall built by Israel is illegal and that other states are obliged to make sure it is demolished as soon as possible.

3. Sustained rural development

3.1. Why?

Sustained rural development is BD's main theme. Many of our partner organisations work on rural development in the South. Ever more partner organisations undertake political action themselves to make a stand for a fairer agricultural and food policy, both nationally and internationally, for fair action over resources, and for fair trade rules. BD backs diversification of the rural economy to create sustainable development and improve the quality of life for people in the countryside. Rural households need access to land, water and other resources, but also access to knowledge, technology, markets, market information and capital. It is impossible to sustain rural areas without reliable governance, investments in basic services and rural infrastructure, making life in the countryside more attractive.

3.2. What?

The political deficiency in rural development and unfair trade regimes have made national and international agricultural and food policy our predominant lobbying priority. For BD this policy has to be first and foremost based on the right to food and family agriculture. Out of this comes access to land and other natural resources, and the development of a national agricultural policy that clearly supports local agricultural companies. In addition, international trade by food and agricultural producers has to be organised in a radically different way, putting common interests above private interests. Commitment to sustainable rural development should then be considered foremost in the subsequent (inter)national political tendencies in relation to agriculture and food, support of partner organisations in the South and political education. Unless all necessary precautions are taken, the consequences of climate change will be pernicious, especially in rural areas of the South. Existing agricultural techniques are often not adapted to a changing environment and the food security of hundreds of millions of poor people is increasingly threatened. Governments and international organizations have to assume their responsibilities. Political action from social organisations is unfortunately also necessary to effectively put pressure on these bodies to take action.

We won't give up



The structures of injustice die hard and it is hard to fight them. Results of political work are only visible in the long run. Nevertheless, political work is important as a sign of solidarity with the South and to reinforce processes of change. A good political decision can have more impact than deploying money, people and other resources on the ground. Just think about the prohibition of child labour that was adopted in India in 2006 thanks to our partner organization NDWM (National Domestic Workers' Movement). These success stories give us the courage and legitimacy to keep up our political action.



In the beginning of March 2009 the **political magazine** [**'Doctoring Structures'**] was **published**. The brochure provides you with an overview of BD's political action. The action areas for our lobbying are amply discussed. In addition, the political action of a few of our partner organisations as well as our political action in the North are explained in more detail. The articles are very accessible, and interesting interviews and colourful pictures ensure this free magazine gives clear background information.. If you are interested, ask for a copy from the Advocacy Department's secretariat (only available in Dutch) – [silvia.schoupe\(at\)broederlijkdelen.be](mailto:silvia.schoupe(at)broederlijkdelen.be).