

Evaluation of the political work of Broederlijk Delen on the conflict between Israel and Palestine

Summary

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Introduction

Objectives of the evaluation

Advocacy and lobbying are among the core activities of the Belgian NGO Broederlijk Delen (BD) – next to working with and supporting partners in the South and development education and campaigning. In 2000 BD created a separate unit within the organisation to focus exclusively on political work: the Policy Unit (PU). The focal areas of the unit have changed over time. In 2010 they include sustainable rural development, the conflict between Israel and Palestine, democratisation and peace building in the east of the DRC and natural resources in the DRC. In 2010 BD decided to evaluate the work of this unit, and more specifically its work on the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The evaluation had to focus on the period 2008–2010, although, where necessary a broader time frame was taken into account.

Two researchers (Tom De Bruyn and Huib Huyse) of the Research Institute for Work and Society (HIVA) carried out the evaluation in the period February–April 2010.

The objectives of the evaluation were as follows:

- analyse and assess the overall advocacy strategy of BD in the conflict between Israel and Palestine in terms of relevance, outreach and effects in general and on the specific target groups of the advocacy strategy;
- give recommendations to ameliorate this strategy.

Specific attention was given to the analysis and assessment of:

- the political lobby strategy;
- the communication strategy, i.e. clarity of BD's position on the conflict (its avoidance of controversy and polemics);
- the *educational work* on Israel-Palestine and the involvement of BD's constituency and volunteers;
- the input of *external expertise* in the Policy Unit;
- the *Belgian networking* with civil society and other organisations;
- the *international networking*;
- the involvement of the *partners of BD in Israel and Palestine* in the political work of BD and the synergy between the international programmes department and the political work of BD;
- the role and position of the *Policy Unit within BD* and the collaboration with other departments.

Methodology

In order to assess all the elements of the advocacy strategy, a combination of methodologies and data collection methods was adopted: document analysis, media tracking, policy tracking, an internet survey among the constituency and volunteers of BD (with a disappointing response of 75), and interviews (with 41 people, incl. representatives of BD, partners of BD in Israel and Palestine, the Belgian media, Belgian political parties, governmental and non-governmental institutions, the European, Belgian and Flemish Parliaments).

Structure of the summary

This summary of the evaluation of the political work of BD on the conflict between Israel and Palestine, describes briefly the evolution of the political work of BD and gives and presents parts of the assessment of BD's advocacy and lobby strategy by policy makers, the media, the constituency, national and international NGOs. The main conclusions of the evaluation are summarised at the end of the report. This summary does not include the evaluation findings of BD's internal organisational structure nor that of the partner organisations in Israel and Palestine.

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The political work of BD

The evolution of BD's political work

The Christian solidarity organisation Broederlijk Delen (BD) was established in 1961 and received formal recognition as an NGO in 1992 and once again in 1997. Initially, BD concentrated on two broad activities. The Campaign & Education Department (CED) organised awareness-raising and educational work in Flanders, via an annual solidarity campaign around a specific issue during Lent. The International Programmes Department (IPD) was responsible for supporting partner organisations with financial means in the South. The content and focus of the CED and the IPD have evolved significantly in the last few decades. The IPD has, for instance, concentrated its operations on a limited number of countries, and in most of them it has established local points of support and has started to send out

volunteers and professionals to the South. The CED has broadened its focus to other societal groups, such as youth movements.

To tackle the structural causes of injustice and poverty, Broederlijk Delen also invested in political work. Until the end of the 1990's, BD did this within the framework of the 'Commissie Rechtvaardigheid en Vrede' (CRV), an umbrella organisation of Christian-inspired organisations (such as the Christian workers' movement ACW and the NGO Pax Christi Vlaanderen (PCV)). One of the main areas of attention was the Middle East, and more specifically the conflict between Israel and Palestine. In 2000 the members of the CRV decided to transfer its lobbying and advocacy activities to BD. BD created a separate unit that focused explicitly and entirely on political work: the Policy Unit (PU).

Activities of the Policy Unit included research to understand the structural causes of injustice and to formulate alternatives, networking with relevant policy makers, and lobby and advocacy. To support the effectiveness of these activities, the Policy Unit had to look for ways to mobilise the constituency of BD, form national and international coalitions with like-minded organisations and work through the media to get its message across. In the last ten years some focus areas have shifted. Nowadays, BD's political work focuses on one thematic area (sustainable rural development), and two geographical areas (conflict between Israel and Palestine; natural resources in the DRC and peace building in East DRC). The conflict between Israel and Palestine has been from the start a joint project between BD and PCV and a priority within the work of the PU. The political work on Israel-Palestine distinguishes itself from the other parts of the PU, because of the close relationship with PCV.

Although the PU coordinator responsible for the work on Israel and Palestine (PU coordinator PI) had built up a relatively broad informal network of organisations in Israel and Palestine that were useful for BD's political work, this was not reflected in the official partners of BD until the mid-2000s. Since then, there has been an active and successful effort to align the choice of partners with BD's political work. The current partners of Broederlijk Delen can be divided into two main groups. On the one hand, organisations that work in Palestine with young children in trauma relief (especially through cultural activities, such as circus, theatre), and on the other hand, human rights and lobby and advocacy organisations, mainly based in Israel.

Excluding the continued intense relationship with PCV, BD's work on Israel-Palestine is characterised by a decreasing level of alliance building with Belgian NGOs. From 2001 to 2009 BD was actively involved in the Actieplatform Palestina (APP) (a coalition of sixteen Belgian NGOs, including vzw Vrede, Oxfam Wereldwinkels - OWW - and Oxfam Solidarity, 11.11.11), but it left the alliance because of differing viewpoints (especially on the issue of the Boycott,

Divestments and Sanctions approach - BDS). At the same time, BD has increasingly invested in European alliance building. In the first instance this is through CIDSE, the international alliance of Catholic development agencies of which BD is a member. BD was one of the main pioneers in the establishment of a formal cooperation on the conflict with certain members of CIDSE. Secondly, BD (partly via CIDSE) has intensified collaboration with other European NGO networks, such as Aprodev, and organisations such as the Mattin Group.

In the first years the PU invested a lot of effort and time in building up a Belgian network of organizations that focused on Israel-Palestine (i.e. APP and on awareness raising of the broad public) at the expense of active lobbying. Moreover, the lobbying activities were ad hoc and were concentrated on violations of international law by Israel. Gradually, the PU moved from a more general approach towards a targeted approach, focusing on a number of specific lobby dossiers (i.e. the EU-Israel Association Agreement and EU aid to Palestine). The rights' based approach became central in the work of the PU. At the same time, BD has developed a number of instruments for awareness raising and mobilisation, such as a newsletter. Peace pilgrimages have also taken a central role in this.

The current lobby and advocacy strategy

Broadly, the PU's strategy aims to raise awareness about the conflict between Israel and Palestine in general and the compliance with international law (IL) and international humanitarian law (IHL) as a basis for sustainable peace in Israel and Palestine in particular. In addition, the PU targets its lobby activities on two specific dossiers: on the one hand, the extension of the relationships between the EU and Israel (via the EU-Israel Association Agreement, relationships through Europol and the OECD) and the acquiescence with and accommodation of Israel's violation of IL. On the other hand, BD concentrates on the relationship between the EU and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), more specifically the EU's aid to the Palestinians. In dealing with the EU's role, the main focus of the PU is not the government of Israel or Palestine's violations of IL, but rather that of its own (i.e. Belgian and EU) governments.¹ The PU has opted for dossiers where policy makers at the European and Belgian level can make a difference, since they concern the EU's and Belgium's own legislation and agreements.

The rights based approach also should avoid the discussion becoming too polemic, and should facilitate the constituency and policy makers to take action without having 'to take sides' or to base themselves on moral or emotional judgements. According to BD, more active enforcement approaches - such as the BDS approach - would be counterproductive in lobby work.

¹ The Mattin Group and Aprodev (which follows the same approach) have coined this the 'passive enforcement' approach.

In its general advocacy BD puts a lot of effort in explaining the historical and political context and structural causes of the conflict, and attempts to give a balanced and objective point of view. It is very wary of being accused of siding with a particular party in the conflict.

The PU decided to concentrate on specific dossiers to focus its efforts. It also made sure that there was no duplication of efforts with other organisations (such as Aprodev). For the specific dossiers, BD works together intensively with CIDSE. Actually, the second dossier (i.e. EU aid to OPT) is mostly carried out by CIDSE, while the first dossier is a collaboration between CIDSE and BD.

Thus, the strategy unfolds itself at different levels. The PU targets a number of well-delineated population groups or organisations with specific activities.

Assessment of the political work by different target groups

Policy makers

Attitude towards approach and position

There is debate about the position and the approach of BD among policy makers. The majority of respondents (representing all of the above mentioned parties and policy levels) argue that BD represents a balanced and objective view on the conflict. They acknowledge that some other politicians consider BD as a 'pro-Palestinian' organisation. This statement is confirmed by the fact that two respondents criticised BD and especially the PU coordinator PI for focusing on only one side of the conflict. One respondent went further and labelled BD as an organisation that pretends to be objective, but in reality only uses unfounded arguments against Israel. Other respondents reject this critique as incorrect. They emphasise that the conflict between Israel and Palestine is a very polemic issue and that it cannot be avoided that every organisation or person who focuses on this issue runs the risk to be labelled as siding for a particular party. BD is said to avoid emotional or moral arguments and concentrates on factual elements and the violations of existing IHL and IL. In general, respondents consider that the approach of BD is very relevant and effective to influence policy makers. Main arguments include the following.

Firstly, the use of moral and emotional arguments to move governments and policy makers has proven to be rather ineffective at the policy making and implementing level according to the respondents. Although BD is focusing on the victims of IHL and IL violations, in general the organisation tries to avoid a discussion based on emotions and attempts to limit itself to existing regulations and facts.

Secondly, the argument that a rights based approach to the conflict would prove counterproductive, in the sense that Israel might terminate the political dialogue, was seldom heard.

Thirdly, the approach is in accordance with what the different Parliaments can do in their relationships with the governments, i.e. urge the government to apply its own regulations. Furthermore, the focus on the particular dossiers, such as the EU's aid to the OPT, is well chosen, from the perspective of pressure from the elected parliaments constituency, because it is about the effective use of taxes.

On the other hand, some respondents argued that in the end political will is essential for the application of legal obligations. For this reason, political dialogue will remain one of the key elements to finding a solution for the conflict. In other words, the BD's approach may prove more effective in theory than in practice.

Some respondents argue that BD should formulate more concrete options to do things and to act. Some respondents also argue that, although the focus on violations of IHL and IL is very useful, real change necessitates a BDS approach. This view is not shared by people at the executive level. It would even be counterproductive according to them, and strong emphasis on this strategy might limit its access to the executive level.

In theory, BD's approach does not explicitly target Israel (or its government), but in practice most respondents agree that BD's political work seems to focus much more on the role of the Israeli government than on Palestinian actors. However, the majority of these respondents explain this by referring to the asymmetric power relationships within the conflict.

Relevance and quality of information and communication

Respondents state that the PU coordinator PI puts in a lot of effort and uses different methods in informing policy makers about specific dossiers, new developments and recent events in Israel and Palestine and urging them to take action.

Firstly, the Q&As and newsletters prove to be a very valuable source of information for the different policy makers. The website is less mentioned.

Secondly, and most important, are the personal communications between the PU coordinator PI and the target groups. These personal contacts include e-mails, phone calls and face-to-face meetings and discussions. Respondents have high esteem for the quality and relevance of information provided by the PU coordinator PI, describing it as up-to-date, objective, well explained and to the point. They also regard as very useful the notes that propose what policy makers should

do (they can still disagree with this, of course, but at least it is a clear option). The PU coordinator PI is also said to be pro-active in her approach and follows up closely what policy makers do with her information.

Thirdly, the delegations and visits to Israel and Palestine are appreciated and considered to be eye-openers to the reality on the ground. However, one respondent mentioned that the delegation does not show the different viewpoints of the conflict and is has a 'pro-Palestinian' bias.

Fourthly, the organisation of meetings in Belgium with delegates from Israeli and Palestinian organisations are very informative. Moreover, it gives BD's work legitimacy, since it is seen to be supported by local organisations. The same counts for joint meetings and opinions with other European networks and organisations.

There is general agreement that BD focuses on relevant policy themes. The following were mentioned: the EU-Israel Association Agreement, OECD indicators, cooperation between Israel and Europol, war on Gaza, trade, settlements, violations of IHL and IL, EU aid to the OPT and the Goldstone report. Some respondents said that BD did not concentrate much on the internal Palestinian political conflict, or on violations of IHL and IL by Palestine.

Effects

Some respondents (in the executive as well as the legislative fields) said that the information provided by BD has changed their own opinion and view on the conflict (i.e. violations of IH and IHL, power relations etc.), while others stated that it had confirmed their own analysis. Most effective are the delegations to Israel and the OPT and the visits of Israeli and Palestinian organisations, although there is not much evidence that respondents keep in contact with these organisations afterwards.

Especially at the executive level, and some parts of the Belgian legislative level, the information from BD is intensively used, according to the respondents, mostly to formulate parliamentary questions or interpellations. Most respondents turn to BD for its extensive and specialist knowledge on specific dossiers, and have acted on issues that BD has proposed.

However, respondents argued that at the Flemish and Belgian level policy makers' capacity to influence in some way the conflict between Israel and Palestine is extremely limited. It is already very difficult to get resolutions adopted by the Parliaments, and even when they are adopted, it does not result in a change of policy of the Israeli government. At the European level, there is much more opportunity to have an impact on the conflict. To some extent parliamentary work has succeeded in slowing down the process of upgrading the EU-Israel bilateral relations, for instance. But in the end, there was not much hope among

respondents that the situation would improve in the medium term by any actions of the EU. Still respondents (at least those who endorsed the approach of BD) stated that continued lobbying was necessary, and advised BD to continue with its focus on the dossiers on which it is concentrating at the moment (especially aid and the violations of the agreements between EU and Israel). Some respondents, however, argued that a more activist approach would be needed.

Media

Attitude towards approach and position

BD's position on the conflict is assessed to be objective, with an emphasis on the situation of the Palestinians. This is considered logical because of the asymmetric nature of the conflict. Some respondents from the media indicated they would expect that an NGO like BD would take on a more activist approach than it does at the moment. The approach of BD is regarded as relevant and effective towards policy makers. However, for the general public, BD does not offer many possibilities for people to act.

Relevance and quality of information and communication

In general, the information provided by BD is considered to be relevant, reliable and up-to-date. The Q&As and newsletters give a general and good insight into certain aspects of the conflict (although it might be more useful for people who are not very familiar with the issue), while the specific information provided by the PU coordinator PI on demand is said to be very relevant and useful. In particular contacts of people and organisations in Israel and Palestine (with explanations about their work and position) is extremely useful, as well as the information on the EU's relationships with Israel. Especially the emphasis on reliable facts is valued. The media are often looking for ways to illustrate a complex or technical issue with a personal story. Although the information provided by BD is well-written and the issues are well explained, it often lacks this concrete human perspective.

Output and Effects

The media tracking exercise elucidates that BD manages to have its viewpoint presented in the media and that the organisation is solicited as an important source of information. Increasingly, there has been attention for the relationship between the EU and Israel and violations of IHL and IL. According to other interviewees, the media represent more or less the same points of view as BD, and consequently BD has been very influential upon the media. Although the evaluation team does agree to some extent with the first part of this argument,

there is not enough evidence to confirm the second part of the statement. The interviewed journalists stressed that they use different sources of information in Belgium and abroad (as well in Israel and Palestine) and look for different opinions on the issues in order to give a balanced but objective account of affairs.

Constituency and broader public

Contacts and networks

The main civil society organisations (such as trade unions) are acquainted with the approach and the issues of BD's Policy Unit. Whether this is also the case for the volunteers and members of these organisations – let alone the general public – is highly debatable. From our small survey, we conclude that, although 70% of the respondents said correctly that BD focuses on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this figure is relatively low, considering that the group of respondents were people who either received the newsletter or visited the website. Still, this is markedly higher than the figure for the DRC – only five out of 75 respondents knew that BD only lobbies and advocates on the four aforementioned issues, while an additional four respondents identified and added climate change (the object of the current campaign of BD) to these four.

Attitude towards approach and position

The constituency of BD support the fact that BD lobbies and advocates on the conflict and agrees with its approach. The approach indeed avoids polemics and gives the constituent organisations firm arguments to defend their positions. It also facilitates a broad support base. However, for the volunteers and broader public, the focus on relatively technical dossiers might be too complex, and difficult to communicate. Therefore it is important, according to the respondents, to keep on focussing on human rights violations in general and broader awareness raising about the context of the conflict. Moreover, BD does not suggest possible ways for people to act themselves and to influence the conflict or the stances of governments and other political actors.

Relevance and quality of information and communication

For the constituency, the communication and information instruments (Q&As, media, newsletters and specific newsletter on Israel-Palestine) are adequate, reliable and relevant. The survey shows the high importance of the website and the newsletter, but this should not be surprising, since the respondents accessed the survey via one of these means. Only two respondents did not find the information of BD reliable, while more than three-quarters assessed it as very

reliable. A quarter of the respondents wanted to have more information about the conflict.

A closer look at these communication instruments shows that the website provides relatively much information but it is rather difficult to find. On the main page of Broederlijk Delen's website there is no mention that BD focuses on the area, and one has to click through a number of pages (for instance, via the world map of one of the pages, where one can hardly identify Israel and Palestine) to find the information on the issue.

Effects

A profound assessment of the quality of the content and outreach of the peace pilgrimages and presentations by volunteers is beyond the scope of this evaluation. In addition it would be very difficult to assess the impact of its awareness-raising activities, since BD does not provide explicit options of what they can do. The most effective method of raising awareness among the broader public is regarded to be through the peace pilgrimages. However, it is difficult to reach out to young people. Possible reasons might be the cost of the pilgrimage (1,200 euro), the timing, and the biblical aspect of the pilgrimage, which might put off quite a large number of young people. Although the intention of the peace pilgrimage is that participants share their experiences afterwards with others via presentations, there is no systematic approach or framework to do this and it is observed that it is not done by all participants.

National and international NGOs

Attitude towards approach and position

The rights approach of BD is especially valued among the European networks and some Belgian NGOs. They agree with the underlying rationale of the approach. Other, more activist, NGOs do understand BD's position and agree with its analysis of the situation, but advocate a more activist, i.e. BDS approach, in order to achieve results. They argue that the BD's approach is too nuanced and does not offer many options for the broad public to influence the issue.

Relevance and quality of information and communication

Notwithstanding the different viewpoints, all respondents appreciated the quality and reliability of BD's information on Israel and Palestine. It is very useful for carrying out their own work. The PU coordinator PI's knowledge of the region is assessed as one of the best within the NGO sector.

Collaboration and networking and its effects

Since the termination of the APP, there is not much collaboration and coalition building of the Belgian NGOs. BD works together on an ad hoc basis with some NGOs but there is no joint strategy development. Interestingly, there is almost no cooperation with French-speaking Belgian NGOs (which is also the case for most other Dutch-speaking NGOs focusing on Israel and Palestine). Respondents have explained this by referring to a less active civil society on the issue in the southern part of Belgium, or to a different way of working and point of view. Another explanation offered was that there is just less contact and interest in each other's work. In general respondents regretted the failure of the APP, and would like to restart some kind of cooperation and joint activities. Some respondents suggested that this could be done on specific issues, allowing diverging opinions about other topics, but capitalizing on each organisation's expertise and constituency. This would give a stronger message to the policy makers.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the international coalition of catholic development organisations CIDSE has become increasingly important for BD. BD is the lead agency in the CIDSE working group on Palestine and Israel. In this framework, considerable information has been gathered and dispersed and lobby activities were undertaken on EU aid to Palestine and the EU-Israel relationships. Although of relevantly recent date, the CIDSE working group has gained a good and rather widespread reputation within the European NGO scene, as well as the EU's institutions. By acting within the framework of CIDSE, some member organisations have more room for manoeuvre within their own organisation and country. According to the respondents, the PU coordinator PI has played an essential role in the development of the CIDSE working group on Palestine and Israel (first as an informal network), and still continues doing this (now that the working group has been formalised). According to European policy makers, lobbying within the framework of CIDSE is more effective (due to the larger constituency) than as an independent organisation. Still, respondents argue that more joint action would be possible among member organisations.

Other European networks also appreciate CIDSE and the PU coordinator PI's role. The PU coordinator PI has helped staff members of other networks in gaining access to certain policy arenas. There is an intense exchange of information, and on certain policy issues networks work together to strengthen their lobbying position.

Conclusion

Finally, the main conclusions of the evaluation are summarised according to the five evaluation criteria of the OECD/DAC in the following table.

Relevance	The advocacy and lobby approach (i.e. rights-based approach) and focus (i.e. EU relations with Israel and Palestine) as well as activities reflect the priorities and realities of the different target groups: policy makers, constituency, media, partner organisations in Israel and Palestine, other NGOs. Within the different target groups, organisations and individuals are approached that have the potential to influence policies. The strategy shows that the PU is well aware of what is possible and acceptable and what is not.
Efficiency	Considering the fact that (1) there is only 1 FTE within the PU responsible for the implementation of the advocacy and lobby strategy, (2) the advocacy and lobby strategy is characterised by a diverse group of target groups and activities, (3) the majority of respondents appreciate the work of the PU, and (4) there is considerable output and effects, the efficiency of the PU is high. Furthermore, the good cooperation between CIDSE has been very beneficial for the efficiency.
Effectivity	The PU has realised a considerable to large output in terms of Q&As, newsletters, information via mails, contacts, articles, visits and delegations. According to most respondents these instruments have contributed to a greater or lesser extent to the successful fulfilment of their work. Besides the broader public, the PU has succeeded in reaching the main target groups of their strategy.
Sustainability	The advocacy and lobby strategy is very dependent on the expertise and engagement of one single person. In the hypothetical case that this person would leave the organisation, there is a great risk of disruption of the advocacy and lobbying on Israel and Palestine. Some elements have been put in place (or are being put in place) to counterbalance this risk: documentation of activities, CIDSE and expert network.
Impact	The lobby and advocacy work has managed to put the EU-Israel relationships on the political agenda in Flanders, Belgium and the EU, although profound changes in the EU's approach to the conflict and the compliance of the third countries with EU agreements have not been identified. Besides BD, many other organisations and individuals have lobbied and worked on this, and the bilateral relations between the EU and Israel have not yet been upgraded.
