

LATVIA

Needed: greater commitment on human rights and development cooperation



Human rights violations continue to be an important and shared concern in Latvia, although human rights activists and the general public have different views on which issues are most important. In terms of development cooperation, neither the public nor the elected politicians fully grasp the concept. Simplistic slogans conceal policies that have very different agendas.

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Latvia signed the UN Millennium Declaration in 2000, obligating it to respect the human rights of its own citizens and be a responsible global partner to those in need. This promise is still far from being fulfilled.

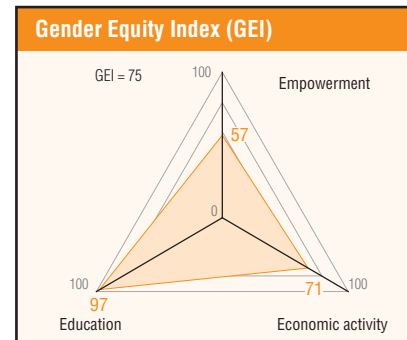
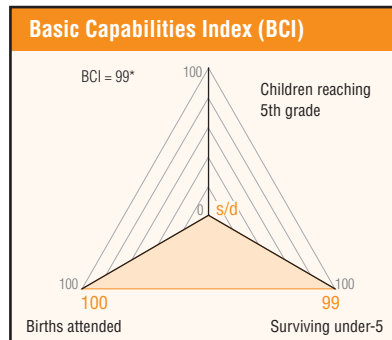
A growing concern

The rapid economic growth in Latvia in recent years is causing major socio-economic problems, including greater social segregation, an increasing income gap between rural and urban populations, very small state-provided pensions and increasing migration of workers.

In a 2006 survey on human rights commissioned by the Latvian National Human Rights Office, most respondents said that the country's first priorities should be ensuring social rights and the rights to education and labour, including a just and satisfactory working environment. When asked about the current state of human rights, 4% characterized the situation as very poor and another 41% characterized it as poor. A slight majority had a positive estimation – 7% thought the country was doing “very well” and another 43% said “average, all problems can be solved”. The most common complaints concerned the political situation (34%), economic conditions (17%) and corruption (19%).¹

Human rights observers² outlined human rights concerns in several categories, including:

- **Hate crimes.** Both hate speech and violence have increased in recent years. Assaults have been reported based on racial/ethnic prejudice and bias against people with a different sexual orientation. The Security Police reported 16 criminal cases of incitement to national, ethnic or racial hatred in 2007, all still under investigation. According to the Security Police, extremist



activities continue to fester. Most involve different racial, religious and ethnic groups, as for example those between Latvians and Russian speakers. In 2007 the Security Police forwarded 58 comments posted on the Internet to linguistic experts; 36 were determined to be violations of ethnic or racial equality.

- **Rights of non-citizens.** In 2007 the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance issued a five-year report, criticizing disparities in the rights afforded citizens and non-citizens, and reiterating an earlier recommendation that the Government grant non-citizens the right to vote in municipal elections. The only official languages are Latvian, and the nearly extinct Livonian, even though more than one-third of the population speaks Russian as their first language (many have been denied citizenship and are now stateless). On the other hand, Knut Vollebaek, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, stated during a recent visit to Latvia that Latvia has made significant progress in integrating linguistic minorities.
- **The right to freedom of assembly.** Controversy over this right has sparked heated discussion, primarily related to two issues: the permits given in Riga for Latvian Legion Day on 16 March,³ an annual occasion for neo-Nazi rhetoric; and the reluctance of municipal authorities to issue

permits for public assemblies of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals (LGBTs). Riga's mayor has refused to sign an international NGO appeal condemning bans on LGBT freedom of assembly and expression; intolerance and violence against people exercising these rights; and the failure of states to fulfil their obligation to ensure security for all inhabitants.

- **Workplace discrimination.** In January 2008 the European Commission (EC) issued warnings to Latvia and 13 other member states that they were failing to fully implement EU rules that prohibit workplace discrimination on the basis of religion, age, disabilities or sexual orientation. The EC criticized Latvia for laws defining discrimination very narrowly and for overly broad exceptions to the ban on age discrimination. Women workers earn wages nearly 18% lower than men's on average, typically have jobs with lower remuneration and are more often consigned to part-time work. As a result they earn smaller social security payments, which will mean their pension benefits will be lower.⁴
- **Mental health.** Community-based mental health services are virtually unavailable. Most patients can only get treatment at a psychiatric hospital or by going to a social care home for the rest of their lives.

* One of the BCI components was imputed based on data from countries of similar level.

1 Report on Human Rights in Latvia, 2006. Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, Report ordered by The Latvian National Human Rights Office.

2 Integration and Minority Information Service. Latvian Centre for Human Rights. <www.humanrights.org.lv/html/29384.html>

3 More on Latvian Legion Day <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latvian_Legion_Day>.

4 “Gender equality aspects in Latvian labour market” Riga, 2006, report ordered by the Ministry of Welfare. <www.darbatirgus.gov.lv/doc_upl/DziLDT_petijums_ENG_1dala.pdf>.

- *Rights of tenants.* The abolition of rent control in 2007 has increased conflicts between landlords and tenants. The rents of low-income tenants are often raised to unaffordable levels, forcing tenants to move out. A majority of the 422 complaints (72 written and 350 oral) filed with the Government Ombudsman in the first half of 2008 concerned tenant rights.

Development cooperation and political will

The overall goal of the Development Cooperation Policy Programme 2006-2010 is to strengthen Latvia's role as a donor country by developing stronger bilateral and multilateral initiatives and relationships. The programme puts strong emphasis on increasing public awareness of development cooperation and ensuring public involvement in establishing development priorities. However, the programme has significant flaws, indicating that policy-makers themselves would benefit from a better appreciation of the principles that underlie development cooperation. This is evident in the Government's Annual Plan, which establishes three criteria that it will use in determining which countries and sectors the country will assist. Listed in order of importance, they are: Latvia's national interests; active presence of Latvian NGOs and/or businessmen in the country; and the recipient country's cooperation with NATO and the EU on defence matters.

None of these have anything to do with development cooperation, and contradict subsequent references to universal democratic values and human rights, combating corruption and strengthening local capacities. National interest should never be a consideration, while the active presence criterion implies it will use assistance to pay its own nationals for services, which distorts the meaning of assistance and reduces its effectiveness in the recipient country. On average, this kind of tied aid is estimated to be 20-25% more costly than goods or services procured through international competition or local sources.

The criterion regarding military cooperation is even more problematic. The European Union has severely criticized this policy, which is similar to those in the United States. Under no circumstances should the rights of the poor be subordinated to strategic economic, political or security goals. As numerous critics have pointed out, the war against terrorism, used in many parts of the world, Europe included, as a pretext for denying human rights and civil liberties, does not promote genuine security. The latter would require ensuring that the world's population has proper access to health, education and decent livelihoods.⁵

5 See for example Simon Stocker, Eurostep, <www.eurostep.org/wcm/content/view/131/40/>.

CHART 1. Latvian Development Assistance, 2001-2006

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
ODA/ GNP	0.019%	0.01%	0.008%	0.06%	0.066%	0.06%

Source: Development Cooperation Policy Programme of the Republic of Latvia 2006-2010, <www.mfa.gov.lv/en/DevelopmentCo-operation/finance/>.

Based on projected economic growth, Latvia has set a goal of steadily adding to the budget for development cooperation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Plan for Increasing State Budget Financing for Implementation of the Development Cooperation Policy of the Republic of Latvia 2006-2010, promised an increase to 0.1% of GNP by 2010. This would still be far short of the EU minimum goal of 0.56%.⁶

So far, Latvia's development support has not made human rights and poverty reduction high priorities. Instead it has become primarily a mechanism for funding selected Latvian NGOs, supporting activities of national institutions and enterprises, and popularizing Latvia abroad. In 2007 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced a request for proposals (RFP) for Development Cooperation projects focused on facilitation of 1) public administration and economic reforms, and of the European and transatlantic integration process; 2) local administration reforms; 3) the development of democracy and civil society; 4) development in the areas of education, culture, social development, health and environment protection.⁷

An RFP for "Communication Activities for Informing the Public on Development Cooperation and Development Education" ultimately resulted in five projects. Outside the RFP framework, the website lists three pre-feasibility study visits and eight projects under the supervision of embassies; five projects were approved.

To date, civil society organizations have not been able to make people knowledgeable about the concept of development cooperation. Only three NGOs devote their full attention to international assistance policy, although a dozen others do some work on development cooperation. A 2006 poll among participants at NGO seminars on the subject found that only 40% had heard the term at all, although 43% agreed that Latvia should provide aid to disadvantaged and less developed countries, and an equal percentage disagreed.⁸ Interviews with academics indicated that they were even less informed

6 Development Cooperation Policy Programme of the Republic of Latvia 2006-2010.

7 <www.am.gov.lv/en/DevelopmentCo-operation/Projects/projects2007/>; 37 projects were approved.

8 <www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/Attistibas-sadarbiba/info/publikacijas/2006-01-24/>

than the general public: 85% claimed that they had never heard the terms "development cooperation" and "development education";⁹ although many admitted that their students were very interested in international assistance.

Given the lack of any Government awareness campaign and limited NGO activity, the current low level of public awareness and support is not surprising. In a 2005 poll, two-thirds of the respondents opposed Latvian participation in development cooperation, asserting that Latvia is still a poor country and has to solve its own problems first.¹⁰

In 2005, when Latvia was entering the EU, three important questions were raised about development cooperation:

- Is an increase in funding the country's only responsibility toward the Millennium Development Goals?
- Will current EU policy and the way it is implemented actually promote a reduction in poverty and injustice in the world?
- Are we indeed establishing a global partnership for development?

Three years later, these questions remain unanswered. ■

9 Questionnaire filled by 50 participants – mainly teachers of social sciences - during Development Cooperation seminars implemented by MITI Foundation in 2007 in the framework of the project "Schools Act Globally: The Development of NGO Network", supported by European Commission.

10 Opinion poll, "Attitude towards Development Cooperation: poll of Latvia's inhabitants" (Attieksme pret att st bas sadarb bu: Latvijas iedz vot ju aptauja, SKDS, 2005. gada decembris).