

Letter to the Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation about COVID19 and Development Cooperation

Her Excellence Minister S. Kaag Ministry of Foreign Affairs Rijnstraat 8 2515 XP Den Haag 3, April 2020

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From: The Development Studies Community of Scholars in the Netherlands

Dear Minister Kaag,

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed the weaknesses of global inequality. If the response to address the spread of the virus is only as good as the weakest link in the chain, then the vulnerability of the poor to the sickness and their lack of access to health care world-wide will be the Achilles heel of the entire system. The UN Secretary-General has highlighted this point repeatedly in his call for global solidarity. The majority of the poor live close together, have poorer health, low access to water, sanitation and health services, no stability of income and are therefore more vulnerable to the pandemic. Their very vulnerability is a risk to their health and that of others in all societies, including the Netherlands. The pandemic may also have indirect effects on peace and security with regional ripple effects. If the pandemic is not also addressed in poorer communities and in poorer countries, it is likely to affect global travel, trade, and investment for months, if not years to come. So is it also in our interest to promote a global COVID-19 resistant development strategy.

At the same time, the spread of this virus is deepening inequalities and insecurities in societies. “We fear that 2020 will be a lost year in global development”, says Paul Richard Fife of the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation. Inequalities are being exacerbated as daily wage earners globally are either unable to earn an income and hence access basic necessities when they are forced to stay at home, or are forced to migrate on foot to their villages in the hope that they can live off the generosity of their families. Their survival is at stake. Migrants, displaced people and refugees who already live in very difficult circumstances are also extremely exposed to the pandemic. Humanitarian challenges are being exacerbated. The elderly are dying away from loved ones in hospitals and the lock-down has exacerbated domestic abuse. Women provide 70% of health care and are in the forefront of treatment but also exposure to the disease. Hospitals have become so efficient in terms of managing their business (i.e. with limited stocks, over-reliance on few suppliers and just in time supply chains) that there is limited redundancy (i.e. back-up systems that kick in when systems fail). Such redundancy is essential for adaptive governance to cope with growing social and ecological disasters. Importantly, this is not just a developing country problem – the COVID-19 outbreak is also affecting the 2/3 poorest in the US the hardest as Human Rights Watch has pointed out. About 27.5 million people in the US did not have access to health care insurance in the US in 2019.

Moreover, while it might appear that we are all fighting the same virus, it appears that we are competing with each other for access to medical supplies; that countries are retreating behind national boundaries and borders; and that global cooperation, solidarity and the multilateral system is at risk. Precisely at such times we need intensive cooperation and mutual learning going beyond simple transfers of ideas from the North to the South. Precisely at such times, we need to reflect on our development model and our focus on increasing growth at the cost of the environment and human health. And yet, the global community has never been so rich with world GDP reaching USD 87 trillion dollars in 2019. The top continues to get richer and inequality increases. As Piketty recently said on our television – inequality is a political choice. Although we all depend on nature’s contributions to humans – a stable climate, clean air, fertile soil and water – 70% of the world’s poor are directly dependent on the direct and indirect benefits that nature provides for their survival; damage to nature has immediate existential risks for them and makes the poor even poorer. And COVID-19 has just added another huge burden on them.

Against this background, we ask you to (a) initiate a discussion within the Netherlands Cabinet on global health challenges; (b) initiate a working group of development cooperation ministers; (c) to see how rich countries, rich

industries and rich people worldwide can mutually engage with partners in the global South to develop a short-term policy to provide relief to the poor, migrants and refugees world-wide; (d) to assess how lessons learnt can lead to a more long-term strategy on redefining development to reduce social and environmental externalities, and reducing inequality between states and within states as required by Goal 10 of the Sustainable Development Goals; (e) communicate the importance of mobilizing action for global health and a new development agenda to the Dutch public and (f) actively engage the development studies community to support you in finding meaningful and systemic solutions for this and related global crises.

Yours sincerely,

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