

# Belgium's foreign assistance : decision maker rhetoric and policy behavior

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## Introduction

Not much has been written on the foreign assistance policy of Belgium. Studies that focus on it singly or in comparison with other cases tend to stress both the colonial heritage and economic interests and often charge that Belgium lacks a coherent foreign assistance policy. Although a preoccupation with economic interests is reflected in the debate on foreign assistance in Belgium, the evidence presented in this paper shows that there is also a realization among Belgian decision makers that the longer term stability of the international system is important to the continued well-being of the Belgian economy. It may therefore be more accurate to conclude that the foreign assistance policy domain is inextricably linked to Belgian foreign economic policy more generally. The consequences for policy are that economic interests figure relatively prominently in Belgian foreign assistance.

To understand the rhetoric and behavior regarding foreign aid policy more fully, this paper will first set it in the context of the institutional configurations within which ministers and state secretaries function. The presentation of empirical evidence is guided by my national role conception framework, which has also been applied to the Dutch and British cases.<sup>1</sup> Although this paper focuses on the Belgian case, occasional comparisons with the other two will be made, especially where this aids in the interpretation of the data.

## I. The Role of Ministers and State Secretaries for Development Cooperation

The Belgian minister or state secretary for development cooperation heads the Belgian Administration for Development Cooperation (BADC), which is attached to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade, and Development Cooperation. This configuration, whereby foreign trade is attached to foreign affairs rather than to a ministry of economic affairs may be an expression of the importance to Belgium, with its high reliance on international trade for its welfare, of its economic foreign relations. The combination of these three subject areas in one ministry has also created tensions, especially between development cooperation and foreign trade, the latter of which has sought to encroach on the domain of the former.<sup>2</sup> The Ministries of Foreign Trade and of Finance handle soft

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1 M. BREUNING. *National Role Conceptions and Foreign Assistance Policy Behavior: Toward a Cognitive Model*. Diss. The Ohio State University. Columbus, Ohio, USA, 1992.

2 C. FRANCK. La Prise de Décision Belge en Politique Extérieure. *Res Publica*. 1987(29), pp 61-84.

loans<sup>3</sup> and the latter also handles contributions to international organizations and banks.<sup>4</sup> This formal division of competencies is not unique to the Belgian situation, but whereas in the Netherlands strong ministers of development cooperation have established working relations with their counterparts in economic affairs and finance that allowed them a measure of influence over such contributions, Belgian ministers of development cooperation have not managed to gain such influence.

Several authors blame this lack of influence on the large number of individuals who successively have been in charge of development cooperation.<sup>5</sup> For the time period covered by this study, 1975-90, Belgium has had eight different ministers or state secretaries in charge of development cooperation, while the Netherlands has seen a succession of six ministers (although only five different individuals) and the United Kingdom six as well. The Belgian officials have indeed had the shortest average tenure in comparison. This is in many ways a reflection of the short average duration of governing coalitions in this state. Table 1 shows not only the succession of ministers and state secretaries for the period under study, but also the various coalitions. Although there are often only minor changes with regard to the parties involved or the individuals holding office in successive coalitions, the frequency of the breakdown and reformation is evidence of an instability of these coalition cabinets that does not facilitate the formulation of clear and coherent policy initiatives. While this issue of instability of governing coalitions affects the governance of Belgium in all its aspects, development cooperation may be affected more than other departments for a reason that is not totally independent of the problematic nature of Belgian coalition governments but is separable from it nonetheless.

Vandommele charges that the office of Minister of Development Cooperation is used as "small change" in the formation of coalitions.<sup>6</sup> That is to say, the office is used to round out a coalition rather than central to the formation of it. In addition, "development cooperation is one of those departments where one starts (or ends) a career and which one tries hard to leave for more prestigious offices".<sup>7</sup> Caudron (VU) charges similarly that

With every new coalition formation the concern for the Third World was always presented as last consolation prize to persons who used the portfolio as jumping off point to more desirable departments such as the prime-ministership, Education, or Finance.<sup>8</sup>

3 L. BERLAGE, Trends in the Performance of European Aid Donors and the Distribution to the LICs. In: O. Stokke, *European Development Assistance*, vol. 2. Tilburg, the Netherlands, 1984, p. 17.

4 C. FRANCK, op.cit., p. 66.

5 See M. VANDOMMELE, Twintig Jaar Belgisch Ontwikkelingsbeleid. In: *Internationale Spectator*. 1982(36), no. 9, pp. 499-506, and P. SERLON, L'AGCD: Vingt-cinq Annees D'enlissement. *La revue nouvelle*. 1985(41), no. 12, pp 529-42.

6 M. VANDOMMELE, op.cit, p. 500.

7 P. SERLON, op. cit, p. 529.

8 Parlementaire Handelingen/Annales Parlementaires (hereafter PH/AP) 23 April 1982 p1412. Please note that if PH is listed first the original quote was in Dutch, if AP is listed first the original was in French.

Table 1

## MINISTERS OF DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION IN BELGIUM FOR THE PERIOD 1975-90

Period	Development Coop.	Foreign Affairs	Prime Minister	Coalition
25-04-74	Renaat Van Elsende	Renaat Van Elsende	Leo Tindemans	CVP/PSC, PVV/PLP
18-04-77	CVP	CVP	CVP	
03-06-77	Lucien Outers	Henri Simonet	Leo Tindemans	CVP/PSC, BSP/PSB, VU, FDF
11-10-78	FDF	PSB	CVP	
20-10-78	same	same	P.Vanden Boeynants	same
03-04-79				
03-04-79	Mark Eyskens	Henri Simonet	Wilfried Martens	CVP/PSC, (B)SP/PS(B), FDF
15-01-80	CVP	PS	CVP	
23-01-80	same	same	same	CVP/PSC, SP/PS
02-04-80				
18-05-80	same	Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb	same	CVP/PSC, SP/PS, PVV/PRL
07-10-80	PSC			
22-10-80	Daniel Coens	same	same	CVP/PSC, SP/PS
31-03-81	CVP			
06-04-81	same	same	Mark Eyskens	same
21-09-81	CVP			
17-12-81	Jacqueline Mayence-Goossens	Leo Tindemans	Wilfried Martens	CVP/PSC, PVV/PRL
14-10-85	state secr. / PRL	CVP	CVP	
	after 09-06-83			
	Francois-Xavier de Donnea			
	PRL			
28-11-85	Andre Kempinaire	same	same	same
87	state secr. / PVV			
20-10-87	same	same	same	CVP
88				
09-05-88	Andre Geens	Mark Eyskens	same	CVP/PSC, PS/SP, VU
91	VU	CVP		

This goes back to colonial days, when the Ministry of Colonies was regarded as a testing ground for junior ministers,<sup>9</sup> and suggests that development cooperation is not regarded as an important subject matter among Belgian decision makers.<sup>10</sup> It also precludes the development of coherent policy, because politicians will be more concerned with impressing --or at least not antagonizing-- those within and outside of politics who can help further their careers, than with developing coherent ideas in the subject area of competence. Most likely, they are also individuals who are new to the subject matter and who, because of their unfamiliarity, are influenceable. All of this suggests that the institutional configuration in Belgium is not amenable to the development of a high profile development cooperation policy, or the development of a distinct conception of the role Belgium should play in this issue area.

While development cooperation is discussed in parliament, the representatives are thoroughly aware that their impact on policy is limited at best. According to Fitzmaurice, "the practical impact of parliament is quite modest," even though it formally has a role in foreign policy.<sup>11</sup> This is not atypical of parliamentary systems, but the Belgian situation is extraordinary in that it sometimes formally approves foreign assistance budgets after they actually have been spent.<sup>12</sup> The result of such after-the-fact policy making is that "whatever continuity there was resulted more from inertia than from a global vision on the future".<sup>13</sup> In other words, it has been argued that any continuity in policy resulted more from actors within the aid bureaucracy proceeding as they had in the past rather than from active attempts at shaping Belgian foreign assistance policy by the state's leaders. As will become evident below, the rhetoric of Belgian decision makers does not fit as neatly in the hypothesized role conception profile as the state's policy behavior.

## II. The Role Conception Framework

The framework that guides the empirical investigation of decision makers' rhetoric posits four role conceptions. These have been derived from the literature on foreign assistance, specifically those studies that assume or infer motivations<sup>14</sup> and those that have summarized those motivations into the categories of

9 R. COOLSAET, *Buitenlandse Zaken*. Leuven, 1987, p. 171.

10 L. BERLAGE, *The Organizational Structure of Belgian Development Cooperation: Evolution and Problems*. Unpublished paper, 1984b.

11 J. FITZMAURICE. *The Politics of Belgium: Crisis and Compromise in a Plural Society*. London, 1983, p. 102.

12 For instance, the budget for development cooperation for 1986 was not discussed until June 1987, the budget for 1983 was subjected to scrutiny in March 1984, and that for 1981 was discussed in April 1982.

13 L. BERLAGE, *The Organizational Structure...*, p. 12.

14 See A. MAIZELS and M. K. NISSANKE. Motivations for Aid to Developing Countries. *World Development*. 1984(12), no. 9, pp. 879-900; R. CASSEN et al., *Rich Country Interests and Third World Development*. London, 1982; MOSLEY, P. Models of the Aid Allocation Process: A Comment on McKinlay and Little. *Political Studies*. 1981(29), no.2, pp. 245-53;

R.D. MCKINLAY and R. LITTLE. The U.S. Aid Relationship: A Test of the Recipient Need and the Donor Interest Models. *Political Studies*. 1979(27), pp. 236-50; MCKINLAY, R.D. and R. LITTLE. A Foreign-Policy Model of the Distribution of British Bilateral Aid, 1960-70. *British Journal of Political Science*. 1978(8), pp. 313-32.

humanitarian, economic, and political.<sup>15</sup> These sets of motivations are here brought together in, respectively, the *good neighbor*, *merchant*, and *power broker* role conceptions. Table 2 presents the conceptualization of these role conceptions in the portion above the horizontal line. The good neighbor role conception stresses charity and aid policies that seek to alleviate acute needs. The merchant role conception stresses the benefits that accrue to the donor state economy as a result of the foreign aid it provides, while the power broker role stresses the *realpolitik* motivations of preserving and enhancing influence. The addition of a fourth role, that of *activist*, distinguishes a set of motivations that is often added to the humanitarian category, although it deviates from what traditionally are considered to be humanitarian motives.<sup>16</sup> This fourth role has economic elements that differ from those of the merchant role conception in that their stated purpose is to facilitate structural change and long term economic benefit. Conceptually, the major difference between the merchant and activist role is their economic time horizon. The merchant role conception focuses on the desire for direct and immediate benefit to the state's economy, while the activist role conception stresses the long term benefits to the donor state that are to be derived from more equitable international economic relations. In essence, the activist role conception translates the ideas associated with the welfare state to the international arena. The words of then minister of foreign affairs Nothomb (PSC) provide an example of rhetoric regarded as evidence for this role conception:

In a sense, North-South relations transpose social tensions to a planetary scale, and we should not forget the big lesson of the social struggles of last century: the road of generosity is also one of good sense and the route of sharing wealth is also the one of economic growth. This is much more promising of stability than caution or a sterile conservatism. (AP/PH 19 November 1980, p. 287)

Evidence for the more immediate benefits stressed by the merchant role conception can be found in statements by Mayence-Goossens (PRL) who, while state secretary, argued that the driving force behind her policy is to "know how to aid the Third world while simultaneously stimulating the Belgian economy" (AP/PH 26 October 1982 p. 181), and Ryckmans-Corin (PSC), who a few years earlier had equated the desire to benefit the donor with interdependence: "The economic effects of development cooperation cannot be denied and are not scandalous. That's interdependence." (AP/PH 19 November 1980 p. 304).

The power broker role stresses payoffs in terms of donor state influence in and over the recipient state. Cornet d'Elzius (PRL), for instance, argues with regard to Belgium's relations with its former colony Zaire that

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g. J. K. BARLING, *The Politics of British and French Foreign Aid: A Comparative Analysis*. Diss. London School of Economics and Political Science. London, 1989; P. HOEBINK, *Geven is Nemen: De Nederlandse Ontwikkelingshulp aan Tanzania en Sri Lanka*. Nijmegen, the Netherlands, 1988.

<sup>16</sup> O. STOKKE, *Western Middle Powers and Global Poverty: The Determinants of the Aid Policies of Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden*. Uppsala, Sweden, 1989; O. STOKKE, *European Development Assistance*. 2 vols. Tilburg, the Netherlands, 1984; C. PRATT, ed. *Internationalism Under Strain: The North-South Policies of Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden*. Toronto, 1989.

Table 2

## HYPOTHESIZED FOREIGN ASSISTANCE ROLE CONCEPTION PROFILES.

NATIONAL ROLE CONCEPTION	1. GOOD NEIGHBOR	2. ACTIVIST	3. MERCHANT	4. POWER BROKER
DECISION MAKER PERCEPTION OF ROLE	Aid is charity. Disaster relief is an extension of such thinking to an acute problem.	'Enlightened vanguard' in negotiated transformation of the international system.	Own state is integral part of the liberal international economy. Self-interest is protecting free trade and domestic economy.	Own country's role in terms of power and influence.
OBJECTIVE GUIDING FOREIGN AID	Aid is need based, but not necessarily geared towards development. Focus is on immediate needs.	Aid is need based, but need is here defined in terms of long term needs. Focus is long term stability of the system.	Aid is based on perceived needs of the donor country more than on those of the recipient.	Aid is based on need to preserve and enhance influence.
THEMES IN RHETORIC	Ethical and moral obligation to 'help those less fortunate.'	Stability, social justice, empowerment.	Benefits of free trade, simultaneous benefits to donor and recipient.	Need to support friendly (form of) government. Responsibility to other, less powerful states.
POLICY BEHAVIOR	Bilateral: in specific instances (natural disaster, drought, etc.). Ad hoc, as need arises, not part of an overall plan (although resources may be allotted through regular budget process).	Bilateral: low level of tying.	Bilateral aid: expect high percentage of tied aid.	Bilateral aid: mostly tied. Greater focus on bilateral than multilateral aid.
	Multilateral: emphasis on agencies concerned with disaster relief, health care, etc.	Multilateral: focus on UN agencies to seek to effect structural change.	Multilateral aid: emphasis on participation in Bretton Woods institutions.	Multilateral aid: not much attention, but focus on Bretton Woods institutions.
		Overall: relatively high % of GNP. Meet UN target of 0.7 % of GNP.	Overall: relatively lower % of GNP. Trade interests may indicate relatively higher % than for power broker.	Overall: relatively lower % of GNP. Does not meet UN target of 0.7%.

it suits to, under certain circumstances, impose ones will and I insist on it, certainly when one is the donor and has all the reasons for doing so at ones disposal.

Allow me, Minister, while on the subject, to recall the words of Thucydides who said that 'it is in human nature to command those who give in.' (AP/PH 19 November 1980 p. 311)<sup>17</sup>

Lastly, the good neighbor role conception is here limited to those humanitarian actions that have the ephemeral payoff of building good will. Such actions are often proposed without reference to a payoff but simply as something that should be done, as for instance Van Elewyck's (SP) statement that "good aid, understood as emergency aid is necessary to save large population groups from starvation" (PH/AP 16 March 1983, p. 1747). The activist, merchant, and power

<sup>17</sup> In addition to this quote, Cornet d'Elzius cites this same line from Thucydides during debates held on 17 May 1978, 4 April 1979, and 22 April 1982.

broker role conception profiles are expected to be emphasized to different degrees in different states. The good neighbor role conception expresses a widely held norm in international relations and this role conception is therefore unlikely to reliably differentiate among decision makers of different types of states. The decision makers are expected to refer to the themes associated with this role conception on occasion, but the other three role conceptions are expected to be more helpful in differentiating among states.<sup>18</sup>

Each of these role conceptions or sets of motivations presents a different view of the manner in which decision makers perceive foreign assistance to benefit their state. The framework furthermore outlines trends in the policy behavior expected to covary with the evidence in the rhetoric. Table 2 provides a summary of the four hypothesized role conceptions. The top half of the table provides a general statement of the role conceptions and associated policy objectives. The bottom half sketches the hypothesized covariations between role conceptions as expressed in rhetoric, and the policy behavior associated with it. The assumption that individual differences between decision makers, who as a group represent the same state, are bounded by the parameters defined by their commonalities leads to the expectation that particular themes will be more strongly in evidence in the rhetoric of the decision makers of different states. Specifically, the expectation is that in Belgium's heavy dependence on international trade will predispose its decision makers to perceive their state's role more strongly in terms of the merchant than the other role conceptions.

### III. The Data and Methods

The Belgian parliamentary debates coded for purposes of this study cover the time period 1975-1990. The debates related to foreign assistance were identified through the use of annual indexes to the Official Parliamentary Reports of the Chamber of Representatives.<sup>19</sup> The annual debates on the budget for most years combine foreign assistance with foreign trade and general foreign affairs in one debate. This presented a problem in terms of the cross-national equivalence with the other two states in the study: whether foreign assistance is discussed on its own or in conjunction with these other topics might influence how the debate is structured and which themes are focused on. Additionally, it makes it difficult to separate out debate concerning this issue area specifically. For purposes of this study, sections of debates encompassing several topics were coded if the *speakers* indicated that they were discussing foreign aid.

The first three rows of table 3 show the distribution of the prevalence of the various role categories in debates that cover, respectively, development assistance only, debates that cover development assistance, foreign trade, and foreign affairs jointly, and a debate that covered foreign trade only. A difference in the prevalence of various role categories can be noted. When development cooperation is debated separately, activist themes are the most frequently mentioned category and constitute 46 per cent, while merchant themes account for 31 per cent of the total of 78 references to themes associated with the four role concep-

<sup>18</sup> More elaborate explanations of both the framework and the expected differences in the relative prominence of the role conceptions in the debate of the Dutch, Belgian, and British parliaments can be found in Breuning, op.cit.

<sup>19</sup> Belgium, Parliament, Chamber of Representatives, *Annales Parlementaires/Parlementaire Handelingen*. Brussels, various years.

Table 3

FREQUENCY OF REFERENCES TO THE ROLE CONCEPTIONS FOR VARIOUS  
DEBATE TOPICS

TOPIC OF DEBATE	ROLE CONCEPTION				N
	Good Neighbor	Activist	Merchant	Power Broker	
Budget for Development Cooperation	1%	46%	31%	22%	78
Budget for Foreign Affairs	10%	31%	39%	20%	144
Budget for Foreign Trade	-	33%	67%	-	3
Total Debates on Budget	7%	36%	36%	20%	225
Participation in Development Banks	-	38%	25%	38%	8
Participation in International Organizations (other than banks)	20%	40%	-	40%	5
Humanitarian Aid	18%	47%	18%	18%	17
Aid and the Economy	-	17%	83%	-	6
TOTAL	7%	37%	35%	21%	261

tions. When the debate covers the various aspects of foreign affairs jointly, merchant themes occur more frequently, constituting 39 per cent, with activist themes 31 per cent of the total of 144 references. While there is little difference in emphasis on power broker themes for the two types of debates, about twenty per cent in each case, good neighbor themes receive more emphasis in debates that cover the various aspects of foreign affairs jointly. The foreign trade debate provides very little evidence, although it corroborates the picture presented by the combined debates, which indicates that the fact that the discussion of development cooperation most years is combined with other foreign relations topics does affect the data obtained from them.

The fact that the emphasis shifts from activist themes for debates on only development cooperation to merchant themes for debates covering various foreign affairs topics is cause for caution regarding the interpretation of the data. The overall difference in emphasis between activist and merchant themes remains so small as to be inconclusive, but had development cooperation been debated separately more consistently, activist themes would have predominated if the current pattern in the data is extrapolated. That is, if the debates during which foreign assistance is discussed separately had made up the larger proportion of the debates addressing foreign assistance and if these debates had been similar in content to those used here covering development cooperation exclusively, the activist role conception would have occupied a more prominent place in the Belgian debate on foreign assistance.

However, such a counterfactual argument ignores the significance of the fact that the various foreign affairs topics so frequently are combined in Belgian parliamentary discussions. The consistent combination of these topics indicates that Belgian decision makers do not conceive their role in the foreign assistance issue area as essentially separate from their economic and general foreign relations, but instead see the two as intertwined. Nevertheless, the role conception



framework that guides the current study assumes foreign assistance to be a recognizable issue area to decision makers, even if it recognizes that the boundaries separating one issue area from another are never neatly drawn. For the Belgian case, the boundaries between foreign assistance and other foreign affairs issues are particularly vague. The implication of the fact that Belgian decision makers are less likely to perceive a role for their state in this issue area that is *to them* separately conceived, is that their rhetoric is also less likely to fit neatly into role categories that assume such a perception.

Before going on to a discussion of the data, however, it should be noted that a significant proportion of the discussion on foreign assistance deals with the organizational structure of the Belgian aid bureaucracy, the Belgian Agency for Development Cooperation (BADC), and more particularly issues that relate to the communitarian conflict. This alternately takes the form of a discussion on whether language parity exists among those employed within the BADC or among those sent overseas by it, whether Walloon universities tend to benefit disproportionately from Third world students acquiring an education in Belgium, or, last but not least, arguments for and against splitting the BADC into two separate agencies, one representing each of the major language communities. These issues are of obvious concern to Belgian decision makers and may in part be responsible for the lack of a coherent vision regarding the Belgian role in the foreign assistance issue area. Berlage supports the notion that issues surrounding the community conflict "have prevented the elaboration and implementation of a coherent cooperation policy".<sup>20</sup> With regard to problems surrounding policy implementation he notes that "frictions along communal lines have been particularly strong" within the BADC.<sup>21</sup>

Although Huyse, in a review of US, Canadian, and English political science scholarship on Belgian politics, charges that a number of authors tend to dramatize the communitarian conflict, it is difficult to avoid the sense that this issue shapes Belgian politics to a very considerable degree.<sup>22</sup> While it may go too far to state that this conflict is what Belgian politics are all about, it does play an important role. If it does not define policy issues, then it certainly contaminates them. With regard to the proposal to split the BADC into two separate agencies representing each of the major language communities, Walloon representative Ryckmans-Corin (PSC) comments that "what one calls 'communitarization' is a dangerous attempt to export our domestic problems to abroad".<sup>23</sup> The Flemish Kempinaire (PVV), state secretary for development cooperation at the time, supports her point of view from the other side of the linguistic divide, arguing that a unified policy requires that the department is not divided into units representing the linguistic communities.<sup>24</sup> These statements, however, represent a much smaller portion of the debate than views that argue in favor of such a division.

In sum, the communitarian issue has certainly influenced both foreign assistance debate and policy. In addition, the incorporation of foreign trade into the ministry of foreign affairs also hints at the large economic component of

20 L. BERLAGE, *The Organizational Structure...*, p 17.

21 L. BERLAGE, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

22 L. HUYSE, *Amerikaanse, Canadese en Engelse Politiek-wetenschappelijke Publikaties over België (1976-1986)*. *Res Publica*. 1987(29), pp. 193-206. He cites Dunn, Fitzmaurice, Mughan.

23 AP/PH, 4 July 1979, p. 1159.

24 PH/AP, 29 June 1987, p. 1983.

Belgian foreign relations. Foreign assistance is not altogether separate from these concerns with the welfare of the Belgian economy which relies so heavily on international trade for its welfare.

#### IV. Decision Maker Rhetoric

Across all fifteen years, the evidence for the dominant presence of a particular national role conception in the speeches of Belgian members of parliament is inconclusive. The merchant role conception was hypothesized to be emphasized most in the Belgian foreign assistance debate, but the activist and merchant role conceptions both are referenced about equally, as the bottom row of table 4 shows.

Belgium is a smaller state that spends relatively smaller proportions of its GNP on foreign assistance than the Scandinavian states and the Netherlands. The state's heavy reliance on foreign trade generally and, additionally, its trade with Third world states as a colonial legacy, were hypothesized to result in the prevalence among Belgian decision makers of perceptions of their state's role in the world in accordance with those posited for the merchant role conception. On average, the activist role conception shows up slightly more often. However, the difference between the two is small. Activist and merchant themes constitute, respectively, 37 per cent and 35 per cent of the total number of themes coded. The small difference between these percentages does not allow a conclusive judgment that either of these two role conceptions clearly guides the rhetoric of Belgian decision makers. As was elaborated above, the fact that the debate on the annual development cooperation budget is for most years combined with other foreign affairs issues is partially responsible for these results. The slight predominance of activist themes overall reported here is due to a higher incidence of such themes in debates other than those on the budget, as can be discerned from Table 3 above. If the budgetary debates are considered separately from those on other topics, the small difference overall between the frequency of references to activist and merchant themes disappears.

When the fifteen years are broken down into the periods in office of the various ministers of development cooperation,<sup>25</sup> the differences between references to activist and merchant themes are, depending on the period, still small or somewhat more pronounced. As can be discerned from table 4, the numbers for all of the periods and the differences in emphasis on each role conception are small enough that it is difficult to attach definite conclusions to them. During the first period, when Van Elslande was minister of both foreign affairs and development cooperation, the activist and merchant role conceptions show up about equally strongly. Under his successor, Outers, a francophone nationalist, the activist role conception dominates the debate. Under Eyskens, the debate emphasizes all four role conceptions about equally. During the periods of tenure of minister Coens and state secretary Mayence-Goossens merchant themes do dominate the debate, but under state secretary De Donnea activist and merchant themes again show up equally strongly. The evidence for the period during which Kempinaire was state secretary for development cooperation does not allow much

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25 Although the periods of tenure of the ministers or state secretaries of development cooperation generally coincide with the periods of tenure for the various prime ministers, they do in four cases span more than one coalition. Please refer to Table 1 above for more detailed information.

Table 4

FREQUENCY OF REFERENCES TO THE ROLE CONCEPTIONS FOR THE  
PERIODS OF TENURE OF THE VARIOUS MINISTERS OF DEVELOPMENT  
COOPERATION

Period	Minister	ROLE CONCEPTION				N
		Good Neighbor	Activist	Merchant	Power Broker	
74/77	Renaat Van Elslande CVP	2%	37%	35%	26%	43
77/79	Lucien Outers FDF	4%	46%	29%	21%	24
79/80	Mark Eyskens CVP	23%	26%	23%	29%	31
80/81	Daniel Coens CVP	4%	32%	43%	21%	28
81/83	Jacqueline Mayence- Goossens state secr./PRL	1%	35%	47%	9%	57
83/85	Francois-Xavier de Donnea state secr./PRL	10%	35%	35%	21%	29
85/88	Andre Kempinaire state secr./PVV	0%	25%	42%	33%	12
88/91	Andre Geens VU	3%	51%	24%	22%	37
TOTAL		7%	37%	35%	21%	261

interpretation, both because the amount of evidence is very small and because the difference between the three categories for which there is any evidence is small. It may be noted that the activist role conception is least in evidence during Kempinaire's tenure, but with an N of only twelve for this period, the evidence remains very sketchy and does not allow any sort of conclusions. During the next period, with Geens as minister of development cooperation, there is a marked shift to the activist role which accounts for just over half of all themes coded for this period. This last minister is a representative of the Flemish Volksunie (VU), which is of interest because the two periods with the clearest emphasis on the activist role conception are those during which a nationalist of either community held the post of minister of development cooperation. While Outers and Geens represent Walloon and Flemish nationalism, respectively, the periods of their ministership share a focus on activist themes in common. While the reasons for this are mere speculation, it would appear that their concern with the advancement of their community domestically translates into rhetoric that focuses on greater equity for third world peoples as well.

These differences across administrations prompt Demeester-de Meyer (CVP) to state that while policy need not be fixed once and for all, policy changes ought to be related to the object of policy:

It must of course be possible for the attitude of Belgium with respect to a developing country to change in relation to change which occurs in the policy of a developing country. However, the attitude of Belgium cannot change arbitrarily with the change of a minister in our own country.<sup>26</sup>

The implication of her observation is that there is a lack of direction in Belgian foreign assistance policy. Others focus on this issue as well, often phrasing their comments as criticisms of current policy. For example, Volksunie (VU) representative Caudron, whose party was in the opposition at the time, argues that

At this moment our development cooperation drags along a whole string of wrongheaded projects that often came about under pressure of all kinds of lobbies, both industrial and otherwise.<sup>27</sup>

This same issue was addressed ten years earlier by a member of the francophone socialist party (PS), Petry, who referred also from the opposition benches to a government statement made at UNCTAD IV in Nairobi as

glaring evidence that the politics of our country are in the service of large private economic interests and not the needs of the populations, whether these populations belong to the Third world or the industrialized countries.<sup>28</sup>

Apart from a preoccupation with the current influence of trade and industry on the shape of foreign assistance policy, there is the concern that benefits to the Belgian economy should not be an overriding determinant of aid policy. Flemish socialist (SP) representative Vanvelthoven cautions that development cooperation should in first instance remain development cooperation and should not degenerate into an egoistic striving for an ever greater *flow back* to promote domestic production, employment and export.<sup>29</sup>

The combined Flemish and francophone socialist parties have been part of governing coalitions during four of the eight periods and the Volksunie during only two of the eight. While Vanvelthoven's statement dates from a period when his party was a coalition member, the representatives cited here might be more inclined to be critical of established policies because they so infrequently have a chance to make their mark. However, even representatives of the Christian People's Party (CVP), which together with its francophone counterpart takes part in every coalition government during the period under study echo the sentiments expressed by representatives like Vanvelthoven. Diegenant, for instance, states that his party "would regret it if a too marked shift of our development cooperation should render our development cooperation more a development trade than a development aid".<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, there are many representatives of various parties who see nothing wrong with a strategy of benefitting the Belgian economy through its foreign aid program. The greater proportion of critical sta-

26 PH/AP, 4 July 1979, p. 1158.

27 PH/AP, 29 June 1987, p. 1974.

28 AP/PH, 8 June 1976, p. 3866.

29 PH/AP, 7 July 1981, p. 2801.

30 PH/AP, 17 May 1978, p. 2056.

tements regarding the merchant role conception, as compared to statements regarding the activist role conception, implies a dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs regarding Belgian foreign assistance. As the statements cited here indicate, this dissatisfaction concerns the influence of interest groups as much as it concerns criticism of the focus on short term economic interests. These two issues may not be entirely separate, yet both are evidence of a lack of vision with regard to the role Belgium should play in the foreign assistance issue area. As there is some indication that there is no strong conception of this as a separate issue area among decision makers, this will come as no surprise. This lack of a strong or coherent conception of Belgium's role in this issue area may be responsible for the observation that

there was an increasing ambiguity in official statements. Basic needs, self-reliance etc. and economic activity and employment within Belgium were all put forward as policy objectives.<sup>31</sup>

This lack of and resistance to developing such a coherent vision speaks from an interaction between a member of parliament and the minister for development cooperation of that time period, Geens. Van der Sande (SP), referring to the Dutch report *A World of Difference* in which minister Pronk outlines a framework for development cooperation policy for the 1990s, sees a need for Belgium to create its own policy plan, stating that "we would again like to press the Minister to, following the Dutch example of Minister Pronk, create a general policy plan for the nineties".<sup>32</sup> Minister Geens responds that such a policy plan is not a very useful exercise, although he declares himself

prepared to draft it. Indeed, it will not require too much effort, but to do what with? I have read the policy plan of Mr. Pronk, too. Despite my appreciation for his policy plan and the contents of it, I ask what to do with it. ... It is an interesting document about development cooperation, but questions arise regarding the efficiency of the policy approach of it, other than as a frame of reference for the future. I am prepared to draft such a plan, on the condition that Parliament will discuss it in all its details and desires to turn it into a serious matter, otherwise it will all be dead letter.<sup>33</sup>

The statement is revealing in its cynicism about the parliamentary support for the development of a coherent foreign assistance policy. As it turned out, Geens never completed any such plan as he was replaced before he could do so. But more than the length of any minister or state secretary's tenure, the institutional structure within which these individuals find themselves makes it difficult to leave a definite stamp on policy in this domain.

The frequency of references to the various role conceptions for the individual ministers or state secretaries for the various periods displayed in Table 5, show

31 L. BERLAGE, *The Organizational Structure...*, p. 14.

32 PH/AP, 7 November 1990, p. 376.

33 PH/AP, 7 November 1990, p. 383.

Table 5

FREQUENCY OF REFERENCES TO THE ROLE CONCEPTIONS FOR THE  
INDIVIDUAL MINISTERS

Period	Minister	ROLE CONCEPTION				N
		Good Neighbor	Activist	Merchant	Power Broker	
74/77	Renaat Van Elslande CVP	-	2	-	2	4
77/79	Lucien Outers FDF	-	2	1	2	5
79/80	Mark Eyskens CVP	2	2	1	-	5
80/81	Daniel Coens CVP	-	2	3	-	5
81/83	Jacqueline Mayence- Goossens state secr./PRL	1	2	5	-	8
83/85	Francois-Xavier de Donnea state secr./PRL	-	-	-	1	1
85/88	Andre Kempinaire state secr./PVVa :	-	-	2	2	4
88/91	Andre Geens VU	-	3	2	3	8

that the various ministers seldom exhibit a strong preference for a particular role conception. While the amount of data for each minister or state secretary for development cooperation is very small, the distribution across the role categories is generally fairly flat. Except for Mayence-Goossens, who stresses merchant themes, none of the ministers or state secretaries show a distinct emphasis on a particular role conception. Of the various ministers, three represented the Christian People's Party or CVP (Van Elslande, Eyskens, and Coens) and three the liberal PRL or its Flemish counterpart, the PVV (Mayence-Goossens, De Donnea, and Kempinaire). No consistency in role conception emphasis can be found among either the first three or the latter three. Although, as already pointed out, the amount of data is too small to attach any firm conclusions to these results, the fact that officials belonging to the same party exhibit so little consistency would seem to indicate a lack of a clear role conception at the party leadership level.

A look at the coalition partners for each period, however, not only enlarges the N but also creates the impression that the leadership of a particular period

Table 6

FREQUENCY OF REFERENCES TO THE ROLE CONCEPTIONS FOR THE  
COALITION PARTIES FOR EACH PERIOD.

Period	Coalition	ROLE CONCEPTION				N
		Good Neighbor	Activist	Merchant	Power Broker	
74/77	CVP/PSC, PVV/PRL	-	8	6	8	22
77/79	CVP/PSC, BSP/PSB, VU, FDF	1	9	6	3	19
79/80	CVP/PSC, (B)SP/PS(B), [FDF (til 15-01-80)], [PVV/PRL (from 18-05-80)]	3	8	5	5	21
80/81	CVP/PSC, SP/PS	1	7	8	4	20
81/83	CVP/PSC, PVV/PRL	1	11	16	4	32
83/85	CVP/PSC, PVV/PRL	-	3	4	3	10
85/88	CVP/PSC, PVV/PRL	-	-	4	3	7
88/91	CVP/PSC, PS/SP VU	-	15	7	6	28

[] = no themes coded for this party during this period

may have some impact. Again, the distribution across the various role categories is fairly flat for most periods. Nevertheless, for three out of the four coalitions in which the socialists (SP/PS) took part the activist role conception was referenced slightly more often, while for three out of four coalitions in which the liberals (PVV/PRL) were involved the merchant role was mentioned more often. For the one period for which this is not the case for coalition containing the liberals, there is an even split between references to activist and power broker themes. These frequencies are shown in Table 6. It needs to be emphasized that these figures are too small to attach firm conclusions, especially since the distributions are fairly flat.

The language communities participate in the development cooperation debate in proportions roughly equal to their relative size in the general population, a point that is easily overlooked. Some debates on foreign assistance are mostly or entirely in Dutch, giving the impression that the Flemish pay more attention to this subject matter. In addition, some speakers make comments like VU representative Maes, who comments regarding the attendance at a debate on development cooperation that "apparently only the Flemish who concern themselves with development cooperation or are concerned about it these days".<sup>34</sup> The frequencies of participation in the debate by representatives of the two language communities do not bear this out. Bilingual speakers, generally government officials, provide close to ten percent of the coded themes.<sup>35</sup> Of the remaining 90 percent, 58 per cent is provided by Dutch speakers and 32 per cent by French speakers, which is fairly close to their proportion in the overall population.<sup>36</sup> There is, however, a difference between representatives of Flemish and Walloon parties in terms of the relative emphasis on the various role conceptions, as can be observed from the totals for the Flemish and Walloon parties presented in Table 7. Representatives of four out of five Flemish parties tend to focus on the activist role, which accounts for 40 per cent of all themes coded for representatives of Flemish parties. For the Francophone parties, the differences between the activist, merchant, and power broker themes are generally less pronounced, although the merchant theme is stressed more overall.

This overall pattern of difference between the two language communities disappears for most pairings, however, if one considers equivalent parties of the two language communities. Representatives of the CVP and PSC both mention activist themes more frequently than any other category. The Flemish and Walloon green parties (Agalev and Ecolo) both stress activist themes as well, while members of the PVV and PRL both favor merchant themes. However, the Flemish SP and its Francophone counterpart, the PS, do not share a similar role conception: while representatives of the SP stress the activist role conception in their parliamentary speeches, the PS does not seem to have a clear preference for activist, merchant, or power broker themes, which are each referred to about equally.

34 PH/AP, 29 June 1987, p. 1980.

35 Speakers were regarded as bilingual if in any one speech they utilized both Dutch and French.

36 According to the Europa World Yearbook 1991, vol. 1., London, 1991, the Belgian population can be divided into 57% Dutch speaking, 42% French speaking, and 6% German speaking. F. E. BAIR's *Countries of the World and Their Leaders Yearbook 1992*, vol. 1., Detroit/London, 1992, reports 57% Dutch speakers, 33% French speakers, 7% German speakers, and includes Brussels as a separate, legally bilingual, category constituting 9.3% of the population. None of the representatives spoke in German in the parliamentary debates I used. The bilingual category in my data does not coincide with that of the second yearbook cited here, but instead notes those speakers who use both languages in the particular speech coded. Hence, these decision makers are generally representatives of one or the other community, who use both languages generally because they are government officials communicating across language communities.



Table 7

## DIFFERENCES IN FREQUENCY OF REFERENCES TO THE ROLE CONCEPTIONS FOR FLEMISH AND WALLOON PARTIES.

Political Party		ROLE CONCEPTION				N
		Good Neighbor	Activist	Merchant	Power Broker	
Flemish Parties		Equivalent*				
Agalev	Ecolo	-	4	1	1	6
BCP	PCB	-	-	-	-	-
CVP	PSC	3	28	21	10	62
PVV	PRL	1	2	11	8	22
SP	PS	1	16	11	5	33
VU	-	4	18	16	9	47
TOTAL FLEMISH PARTIES		9	68	60	33	170
		5%	40%	35%	19%	100%
Walloon Parties		Equivalent*				
Ecolo	Agalev	-	3	1	-	4
FDf	-	-	6	6	2	14
PCB	BCP	2	-	-	-	2
PS	SP	3	7	7	8	25
PSC	CVP	2	9	8	6	25
PRL (incl. PLP)	PVV	3	3	10	5	21
TOTAL WALLOON PARTIES		10	28	32	21	91
		11%	31%	35%	23%	100%

\*Equivalent party of the other language community.

## V. Assessment of the Rhetorical Evidence

Although at first glance the fact that the activist and merchant role conceptions are referenced about equally frequently may be explained by the pronouncement that "the possibility of contradictions between the objectives of helping the poor and stimulating the Belgian economy has been denied",<sup>37</sup> a closer investigation of the themes coded for each of these role conceptions reveals that aiding the poor plays a secondary role to Belgian decision makers. The longer term stability of the international environment is the aspect of the activist role that concerns them most. This confirms a preoccupation with economic issues, rather than contesting it. The main point of confusion for Belgian decision makers seems to be the need to secure immediate payoffs for their economy, while they also realize that they cannot ignore the tensions within the international system as these may threaten their ability in the longer term to continue to secure the necessary benefits for the Belgian economy. While these perceptions do not fit neatly into the four posited roles, they do fit logically together.

<sup>37</sup> L. BERLAGE, *The Organizational Structure...*, p. 16.

Previous authors have argued that of all bilateral foreign relations, foreign trade and development cooperation are most subject to pressure groups and that these groups are in a position to influence policy because of a lack of leadership that gives policy direction.<sup>38</sup> The foreign assistance debates, however, indicate that it may not be a lack of leadership, but a leadership that coincides with the interests of the Belgian economy. The perception expressed by CVP representative Steverlynck may describe a more generally held conception of the role the government should play regarding foreign affairs generally:

The government has as its first duty to create a generally favorable economic climate, also in foreign relations. It is the government that enters into trade treaties, and participates in all kinds of international meetings for the benefit of international trade.<sup>39</sup>

Steverlynck's argument supports the notion that economic issues dominate the foreign policy agenda of Belgium. The joint occurrence of the mutual benefit and stability of the international environment themes may not fit neatly into the hypothesized role conceptions, since these themes are associated with, respectively, the merchant and activist roles. However, both role conceptions share a focus on economic issues. The fact that the expressions related to the activist role conception are phrased in fairly abstract terms may indicate that Belgian decision makers are concerned about the longer term future of their international economic relations, but not quite sure how to affect that environment in ways that ensure that desired stability for them. In addition, the fact that the discussion on development cooperation is often held jointly with that on foreign trade and foreign affairs generally, indicates that securing Belgium's economic interests extends into the issue area of foreign assistance as well. Put differently, foreign aid apparently is not perceived as a wholly separate and distinct subject matter by Belgian decision makers.

## VI. Congruence with Policy Behavior

Belgian aid has favored bilateral over multilateral expenditures. On average, close to two-thirds of foreign assistance falls into the category of bilateral aid (see table 8). This is similar to the policy behavior of the Netherlands. This runs counter to East's finding that small states rely more on multilateral foreign policy because of their lesser capacity to administer and implement programs on their own.<sup>40</sup> Of course, East's research concerned small state foreign policy more generally and it is possible that foreign assistance provides a payoff that makes it worth the effort for small states. Bilateral assistance gives the donor state greater control over the destination of such aid, which may enhance the potential usefulness of foreign assistance in the service of trade relations. Belgian decision makers do actually appear to have such expectations of bilateral aid. Cornet d'Elzius (PRL), for example, states that bilateral aid is "more precise, more concrete, and more appropriate because it is easier to check how it is used than multilateral aid."<sup>41</sup> This would fit well with the merchant, but less well with the activist role conception.

38 C. FRANCK, *op.cit.*, p. 83; P. SERLON, *op. cit.* p. 530, p. 538.

39 PH/AP, 29 February 1984, p1899.

40 M. A. EAST. *Size and Foreign Policy Behavior: A Test of Two Models. World Politics*. 1973(25), no. 4, p. 556-57.

41 AP/PH, 4 July 1979, p. 1115. Minister Geens made similar statements in an interview with the author.

Table 8

## BELGIUM : FOREIGN ASSISTANCE EXPENDITURES

Year	ODA %GNP	ODA \$mil	Multilateral (% of total)	bilateral (% of total)	Multilateral Un- agen- cies (% of multi)	EEC	World Bank*	Other	Bilateral Tied** (% of bi)	Part. Tied***	Uni- ted****
VAN ELSLANDE											
1975	.59	378	33	67	14	41	45	0	..	..	..
1976	.51	340	33	67	22	45	28	5	..	..	..
1977	.46	371	29	71	29	50	14	7	74	0	26
OUTERS											
1978	.55	536	42	58	24	16	58	2	..	..	..
EYSKENS											
1979	.57	643	31	69	19	41	28	12	73	0	27
COENS											
1980	.50	595	23	77	10	64	8	18	24	0	76
MAYENCE-GOOSSENS											
1981	.59	575	36	64	23	45	30	2	71	0	29
1982	.58	499	41	59	16	40	42	2	77	0	23
DE DONNEA											
1983	.59	479	38	62	17	43	33	7	74	0	26
1984	.58	446	41	59	12	43	42	3	..	..	..
1985	.55	440	37	63	11	44	42	3	67	0	33
KEMPINAIRE											
1986	.48	547	34	66	5	46	48	1	57	<1	43
1987	.48	687	38	62	18	38	39	5	..	..	..
GEENS											
1988	.39	601	31	69	16	72	12	0	57	0	43
1989	.46	703	49	51	4	32	64	0	..	..	..
1990	.45	889	38	62	20	35	41	4	..	..	..

\* World Bank Group and regional development banks. Includes capital subscription payments to IBRD, IFC, IDA

\*\* Mainly tied to procurement in the donor country.

\*\*\* Contributions available for procurement from donor and substantially all developing countries.

\*\*\*\* Fully and freely available for essentially world-wide procurement.

Source:

OECD, various years, Development Co-Operation: Efforts and Policies of the Members of the Development Assistance Committee.

Paris: OECD.

It was hypothesized that the merchant role conception would be associated with an emphasis on the Bretton Woods institutions in the multilateral domain. The data for Belgium bear this out as the World Bank Group and regional Banks generally receive a greater share of its multilateral aid than UN agencies. However, most years the EEC receives the largest share of Belgium's multilateral aid budget. This is more comparable to the multilateral aid allocation pattern of the

United Kingdom than of the Netherlands, but rather than the United Kingdom's growing emphasis on EEC aid, Belgium has consistently allocated between one third and one half of its multilateral budget to the EEC (see table 8).

In their bilateral aid, Belgian decision makers favor tied aid generally, although the gap between tied and untied aid narrows in the second half of the 1980s. In contrast to the Dutch case, Belgian decision makers make hardly any use of partially tied aid. This, again, parallels the British policy behavior pattern more closely than that of the Netherlands. The consistent emphasis on tied aid follows the expectations set forth in the merchant role conception profile, as does the overall level of foreign assistance as measured in the percentage of GNP spent on it. On balance, the Belgian policy behavior conforms to the hypothesized merchant role conception better than the rhetoric of its decision makers.

### Conclusion

The rhetoric of Belgian decision makers at first glance appears inconclusive, although the themes stressed within the role conceptions indicate that economic concerns strongly influence the thinking of Belgian decision makers regarding foreign policy in general and development cooperation as an issue within this larger domain. There is some indication that development cooperation is not generally perceived as an issue area that stands totally independent from Belgian foreign economic policy, as it is generally debated together with foreign trade and foreign affairs. Although some representatives argue that development cooperation should not stand in the service of Belgian economic interests, on the whole this connection is not something Belgian decision makers feel a need to apologize for.

The lack of a conception of foreign assistance as a separate issue area may account for difficult fit between the data regarding the rhetoric and the hypothesized merchant role conception. As pointed out, the themes that are stressed most frequently lend support to the notion that the economic well-being of Belgium is an overriding concern. The desire to benefit the domestic economy through its foreign assistance shows this clearly. The secondary focus on the longer term stability of the international environment is a preoccupation that supports the notion that Belgian decision makers are well aware that their economy is open and vulnerable to events beyond their borders.

The various policy behavior measures show a more clear cut congruence with the merchant role conception than the rhetoric. This discrepancy between the rhetoric and behavior measures could be explained on basis of the limited impact parliament has on foreign assistance policy making. This could be regarded as stemming from a lack of direction or leadership provided by ministers and parliament. Such an explanation might seem reasonable given that there does not appear to be a clear conception among Belgian decision makers regarding the role their state should play in this issue area. However, it could also be explained to be a consequence of the perception that foreign assistance and foreign economic relations are intertwined rather than strictly separate issue areas. While the rhetorical data are inconclusive, the intertwining of these issue areas and the fact that they are debated jointly does point to a perception by Belgian decision makers of a connection between foreign assistance and its potential benefits to their domestic economy. Whether this constitutes a lack of a coherent foreign policy is to be debated. It is just as easily interpreted as the

result of a decision maker conception of the Belgian state as vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the world economy.

**Summary : Belgium's Foreign Assistance : Decision Maker Rhetoric and Policy Behavior**

*Not much has been written on the foreign assistance policy of Belgium, but work that focuses on it singly or in comparison with other cases tends to charge that Belgium lacks a coherent foreign assistance policy. This study examines the rhetoric of Belgian decision makers and the policy behavior of the state, utilizing a framework of four national role conception profiles, each bringing together a set of perceptions regarding the role decision makers perceive their state to play in this issue area.*

*Parliamentary debates for the period 1975-90 are coded for mention of themes associated with these profiles, while OECD data regarding the foreign aid expenditures for the same period provide insight into the policy behavior. It concludes that Belgian decision makers do not perceive foreign assistance as a separate issue area, but as inextricably linked with foreign (economic) policy.*