# 15 Global citizenship education and public support in OECD countries

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Public support underpins development co-operation and taxpayer support is vital for accelerating efforts to reduce poverty and address climate change. Survey results show public backing for international development initiatives that aim to address poverty and inequality across countries. This chapter focuses on the role of global education and critical thinking and public engagement in countries providing development co-operation, to combat misinformation and to ensure that citizens have a comprehensive understanding of interconnected global issues such as poverty, inequality and climate change. Promoting global citizenship and fostering well-informed civic participation through education can cultivate an informed public discourse. This is essential for mobilizing resources and political will to achieve equitable and sustainable global transitions.

## Key messages

- Surveys of public attitudes towards development co-operation have consistently found a solid core of support for public spending to reduce poverty and inequalities and to ensure a just green transition.

- Educating the public and tackling misperceptions about fighting inequality and poverty can spur action; greater public awareness can translate climate change concerns into actionable policy.

- Fostering global education, global citizenship, critical thinking and public engagement can provide the antidote to misinformation and build greater public understanding of global issues such as poverty, inequality and climate change.

## Introduction

Today's global development challenges are complex and interconnected. Addressing them requires an enormous investment of public resources and political will. Both rely on sustained, strong backing from the public. This is especially true for poverty, inequality and climate action because these challenges present policy makers, politicians and taxpayers with tough choices and trade-offs. A key component of mobilising support is to build greater public understanding of the issues, stakes and importance of engaging in international development co-operation.

## There is broad public support for poverty, inequality and climate change

Surveys across the European Union (EU) and OECD countries reveal high support for combating poverty abroad. Support has remained consistently high over a ten-year period since 2013 and even increased over the decade (Figure 15.1). A recent Eurobarometer poll found 74% of respondents think tackling poverty in developing countries should be a main priority for the European Union. While this represents a decline of six percentage points from the previous year, support remains higher than during the 2013 to 2018 period (European Commission, 2023[1]).

This high level of support for action on tackling international inequality and poverty is consistent with research that shows high levels of trust in international organisations to tackle these issues. Available data for France, Germany and the United Kingdom also highlight strong trust in international organisations in addressing poverty. In assessing institutional efficacy in reducing poverty in poor countries, respondents believe that the United Nations and other international organisations can make the most significant impact (61% for Germany, 60% for France and 56% for the United Kingdom).

**Figure 15.1. Support among EU countries for tackling poverty in developing countries**
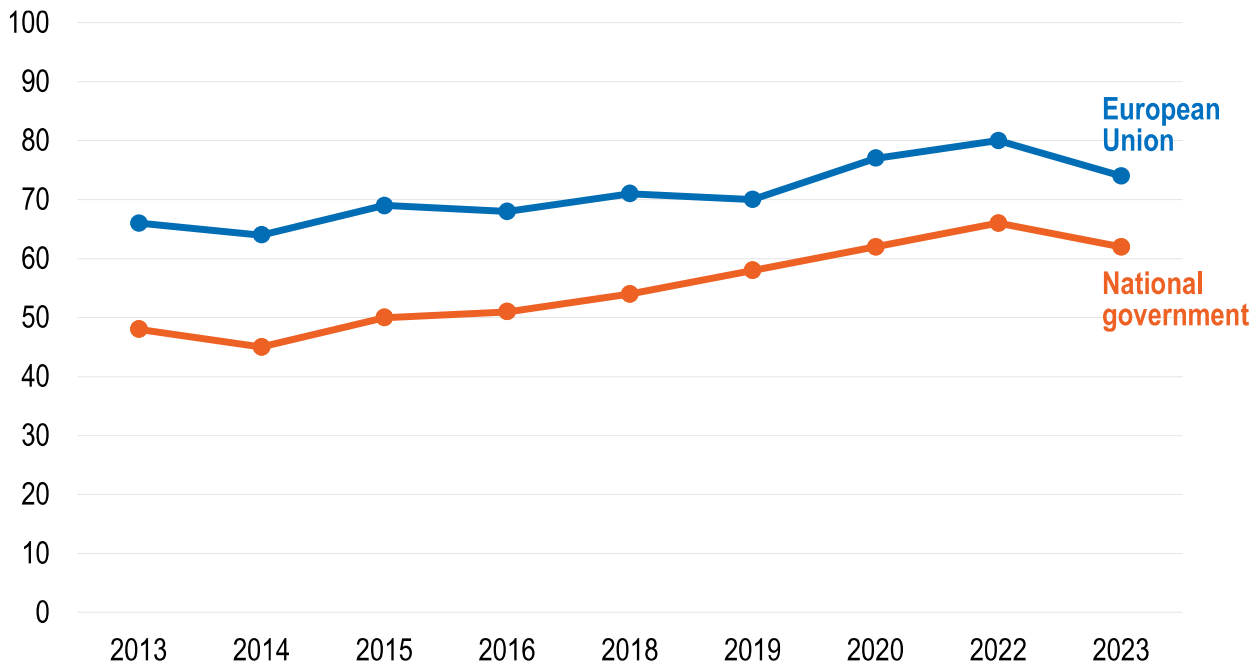


Note: Percentage of respondents who think tackling poverty should be one of the main priorities of the European Union and their respective national government.
Source: European Commission (2023[1]), *EU Citizens and Development Cooperation*, https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2952.

Public concern about social and economic inequalities is high, with almost 80% of respondents in OECD countries agreeing that economic inequality should be reduced (OECD, 2021[2]). While there may be disagreement over how this should be achieved, International Social Survey Programme polling across 26 countries reveals that 78% of people believe that inequality between countries is too high and most respondents feel angry about this (Steinmetz, Sapin and Joye, 2022[3]). Some opposition to tackling inequality can be solved with framing, for example, members of the public are more supportive of inequality when framed as "ensuring equal opportunity for all".[1]

Support for climate action is notably high. A recent study across 63 countries found that 86% believe that climate change is a serious threat (Vlasceanu et al., 2024[4]). Another study in 125 countries showed 89% desire more political action (Andre et al., 2024[5]). However, support for specific measures like carbon taxes is lower, influenced by perceptions of fairness, effectiveness and personal impact (Dechezleprêtre et al., 2022[6]). This finding underlines the fact that public support for addressing climate change cannot be separated from wider social justice concerns, such as poverty and inequalities. Research on public perceptions suggests policy makers can win support for poverty eradication and tackling inequality by tapping into public support for a just green transition.

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For example, when asked about the right balance of climate action versus tackling inequality in development efforts, pluralities across five European publics believe that the fight against inequality and climate change are indivisible (Harris Interactive, 2024[7]).

Focusing on youth, a 2019 Eurobarometer survey revealed many respondents felt alienated from traditional politics, yet young people are increasingly engaged in non-traditional political participation. In a European survey of 18,156 youths aged 16-30, 87% reported engaging in at least one political or civic activity, such as voting or signing a petition (Ipsos European Public Affairs, 2021[8]). Young people also cited tackling poverty and social inequality (43%) as their top priorities; followed by combating climate change and protecting the environment (39%); and combating unemployment or a lack of jobs (37%).

Public support for continued spending on official development assistance (ODA) to poorer countries is generally strong, though this varies depending on the survey. A recent study of international attitudes toward global policies found that fewer than 16% of respondents wanted their country's foreign aid reduced while 62% expressed support for increasing it, including 17% who supported an unconditional increase (Fabre, Douenne and Mattauch, 2023[9]). In fact, since the mid-1980s, polling has consistently demonstrated high levels of public support for foreign aid, though there are some variations between countries and over time, such as during economic crises (Riddell, 2007[10]).

Public opinion surveys from the Development Engagement Lab in June 2024 indicate majority support for development aid in France (57%), followed by the United States (55%), Germany (52%) and the United Kingdom (48%) (Oh, 2024[11]; Oh, 2024[12]; Oh, 2024[13]; Oh, 2024[14]). In these countries, support is notably higher among younger people, especially those aged 18-24 and 25-34, compared to older age groups. However, support for development aid has been declining since 2020, when it peaked at 70% in France and Germany and 61% in the United States, while it peaked at 56% in 2022 in the United Kingdom (Figure 15.2).

**Figure 15.2. Trends in aid support in France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States, between September 2019 and June 2024**
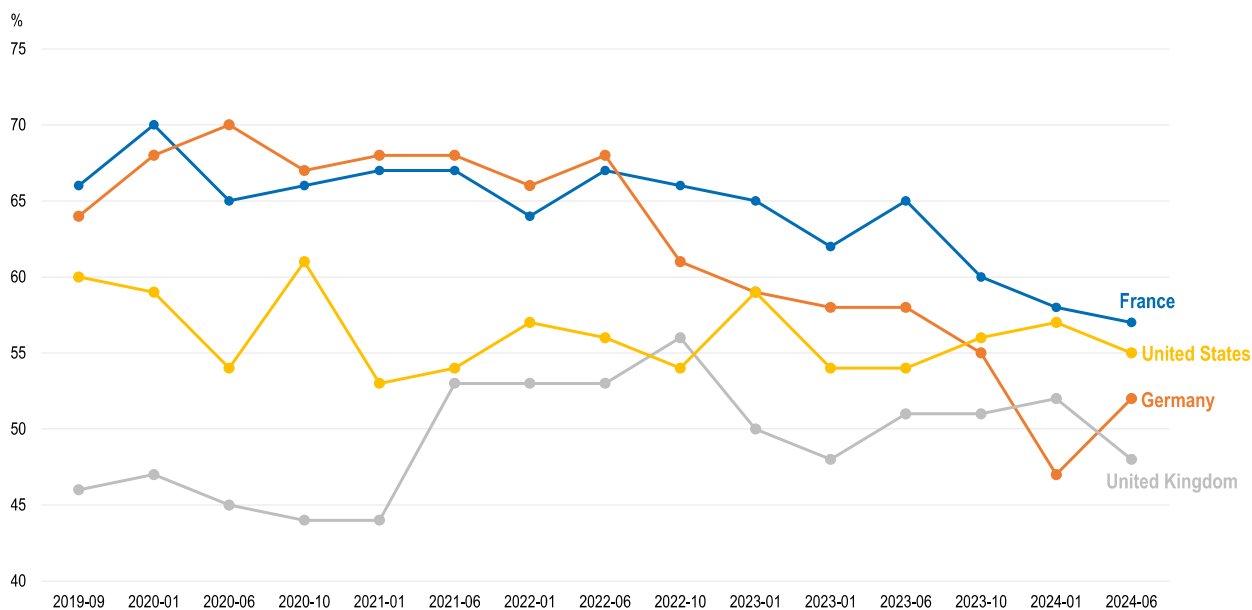


Notes: Percentage of respondents who think we should keep or increase current expenditure levels. Adults in France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. Data are weighted to be nationally representative. Fieldwork by YouGov, June 2024.
Source: Development Engagement Lab Dashboard. Graph shown on the German (DE) Dashboard June 2024. www.developmentcompass.org.

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## Public misperceptions and knowledge gaps can influence public support

What people know, or think they know, about global poverty and inequality trends can influence whether they support public investment in solutions at home and abroad (Rosling, Rosling and Rönnlund, 2018[15]). Providing information about inequality is an important part of shifting these perceptions and creating a common ground for policy discussions (OECD, 2021[16])

Misperceptions can have serious consequences, dampening enthusiasm for investing in poverty and inequalities reduction. A 24-country study conducted just after the agreement of the Sustainable Development Goals found that the great majority did not think there had been progress in reducing extreme poverty, even though it had been nearly halved since 1990 (Lampert and Papadongonas, 2018[17]).

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The belief that aid is ineffective and gets lost to corruption, is an oft-cited reason for lack of support. Informing people about aid effectiveness can create "an optimistic starting point for further engagement", generating momentum for greater public engagement in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (Lampert and Papadongonas, 2018[17]).

A study of France, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States found that providing accurate information on ODA spending led respondents to express greater preference for more government spending on ODA (Fabre, Douenne and Mattauch, 2023[18]). This supports other research findings that show that providing respondents with accurate information about foreign aid spending as a percentage of the national budget, significantly reduces support for budget cuts (Scotto et al., 2017[19]; Gilens, 2001[20]). Misperceptions about what others believe also affects support. Andre et al. (2022[21]) suggest that correcting such misperceptions would effectively increase pro-climate behaviour.

However, merely correcting such misperceptions may not automatically lead to more support for poverty alleviation or foreign aid. Research by van Heerde-Hudson (2019[22]) found that people frequently overestimate their government's spending on ODA, often by orders of magnitude, but providing correct data does not always lead to support for increased spending.

Having informed citizens is essential for democratic participation, but public support for the fight against global poverty depends on a variety of factors and a complex web of motivations (Hudson and van Heerde-Hudson, 2012[23]). These findings provide a solid evidence base showing that encouraging deeper

knowledge and engagement with global issues, helps cultivate critical thinking and social and emotional skills such as empathy and open-mindedness.

## An engaged, informed public, and deeper understanding is key to tackling poverty, inequalities and green transitions

Fostering global citizenship, critical thinking and public engagement can provide the antidote to misinformation and lack of information about the challenges and benefits of meeting global ambitions on poverty, inequalities and climate. This is also key to translating broad public support for these goals into willingness to invest public finance resources into achieving them. As noted in a recent OECD report on fighting inequality (OECD, 2024[24]) global education also helps ensure the sustainability of interventions over time.

For many years, OECD countries have developed educational programmes to promote active global citizenship, addressing global justice, human rights and sustainability challenges. Global education – a collective noun for these initiatives – has been growing and developing in OECD countries, and globally, for several decades.[2,3] It is being implemented throughout formal schooling and in universities, in non-formal education processes like youth work, and in informal learning processes, often with government support and strong multi-stakeholder involvement (McAuley and Wegimont, 2022[25])[4]. It is now widespread across education systems and many countries have national strategies designed to increase and improve this form of education to include all people, drawing on both development co-operation and national education resources (Box 15.1).

> **Box 15.1. Development co-operation and global education: Examples from a selection of DAC countries**
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> Global education has been growing in many Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member countries for decades. Members have developed guiding national strategies; lead strong inter-ministerial co-operation; supported co-ordination; and provided annual and multi-annual funding for government, stakeholders and strategic initiatives. Internationally, this work is increasing in quality and network size, with a growing evaluation and research base. Some national examples from European DAC member countries (see below) are sourced from the Global Education Network Europe (GENE).
>
> - **Belgium:** The Belgium Federal Ministry for Development Cooperation adopted a new National Strategic Note on Global Citizenship Education in Belgium during its Presidency of the European Union in 2024. It emphasises the role of global education in transforming international development co-operation – enabling citizens to understand global issues. Official development assistance supports stakeholder-led global education. BeGlobal, run by Enabel, promotes public engagement with international issues and invests in research and knowledge dissemination.
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> - **Czechia:** The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs leads a national strategy group on global education which works with stakeholders and other ministries, including the Ministry of Education, to integrate global education into everything from teacher education to school-level sustainability processes. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently hosted a regional roundtable for policy makers from Austria, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia to explore the integration of the Dublin Declaration on Global Education to 2050 into national policy and provision.
>
> - **Ireland:** The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a specialised unit dedicated to the integration of global citizenship education within education provision – formal, non-formal and informal. Policy makers collaborate closely with stakeholders, guided by national strategy documents. They balance funding provisions between strategic partnerships like Development and InterCultural Education (DICE) and sector-wide approaches (for example, schools and the youth sector), while also allowing for stakeholders to create initiatives. Ireland chaired the drafting of the European Declaration on Global Education to 2050, together with Luxembourg, and hosted the Dublin Congress 2022 devoted to these issues.
>
> - **Portugal:** Led by the Portuguese Development Cooperation Agency, Camoes, Portugal is developing its third Global Education National Strategy. Like previous national strategies, it builds on the fact that global education is one of the three pillars of Portuguese Development Cooperation Policy. The process of developing, monitoring and evaluating this national strategy involves a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, incorporating all relevant ministries and agencies and significant stakeholder engagement.
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> Note: See also https://knowledge.gene.eu for a full range of European examples.
> Source: GENE (2015[26]; 2017[27]; 2018[28]; 2019[29]; 2021[30]) The State of Global Education in Europe (SOGE) reports and 2022-2023 (forthcoming); GENE (2017[31]), Global Education in Belgium; GENE (2012[32]), Global Education in Ireland; GENE (2014[33]), Global Education in Portugal; GENE (2008[34]), Global Education in the Czech Republic; OECD (2024[35]), *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews*, https://doi.org/10.1787/23097132; Scheunpflug and Wegimont (2024[36]), Global Education in Europe: National Histories.

Global education is designed to dispel myths, encourage critical thinking and engagement, and deals directly with issues of poverty eradication, inequality (local and global) and climate justice. It affirms values of global justice and solidarity and cultivates active global citizenship. Global education also enables civic

participation and active engagement with political debate and other vital components of democracy and is essential to countering shrinking civic space.[5]

The European Declaration on Global Education to 2050 provides a strategic framework for designing and implementing global education in European countries (Box 15.2). This declaration, agreed in November 2022, and follow-up processes are coherent with other regional and global processes such as the European Commission's DG INTPA DEAR Programme; the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe's Education for Sustainable Development Strategy; and UNESCO's 2023 Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development.

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### Box 15.2. The European Declaration on Global Education to 2050

The European Declaration on Global Education to 2050 is a European strategy document outlining the vision and commitments of European countries and various stakeholders to promote global education.

- **The process:** Convened by the Global Education Network Europe (GENE), and led by Ireland and Luxembourg, it involved policy makers, civil society organisations, local and regional governments, academics, "global critical friends" from other regions, and international organisations reflecting the strength in support for global education in many countries.

- **Values and vision:** Global education promotes a vision of education that is raising awareness of social justices, as well as human rights, justice equality, sustainability and peace within an international context. It ensures an understanding of the global challenges and of their root causes. It values different perspectives and knowledge of all cultures, and promotes emancipatory, inclusive and participatory pedagogical practices that enable critical thinking and inspire hope. Global education empowers people to take action for social, economic and ecological transformation.

- **Implementation strategy:** GENE works with ministries and agencies in member states to strengthen global education through:

  o Supporting strategy development, reviewing policy and practices, advising on and affirming good practices, encouraging engagement with stakeholders (e.g., local and regional governments, youth, civil society organisations).

  o Reinforcing collaboration with international organisations such as the European Commission, UNESCO, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, and the OECD.

  o Supporting global and international processes in Asia Pacific, Latin America and Africa.

- **National commitments:** It encourages countries to develop national global education strategies, mainstream global education, and strengthen inter-ministerial co-operation and coherence. It emphasises engaging diverse stakeholders, supporting educators and developing resources for global education. Additionally, it advocates for supporting research, including marginalised communities; investing in quality, monitoring and evaluation; and fostering innovation. The declaration also encourages efforts to reach new audiences and active participation in international networks.

Source: GENE (2022[37]), European Declaration on Global Education to 2050, https://www.gene.eu/declaration.

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## Conclusion

Tackling poverty and inequality and the green transition require strong investments of public resources. Without broad public support, the interventions and policy actions required to address these global and local challenges will not be effective or sustainable. Measuring public support for development co-operation and investment in global goals is a first step. Engaging the public in political and civic debate, dispelling misperceptions and raising awareness of what is at stake can maintain the momentum for co-operation at the global level. Global education programmes supporting deeper understanding of global problems and engagement of global citizens, encouraging critical thinking and providing avenues for action are increasingly at the heart of education systems and can deepen critical public support for and engagement with international action towards a more just and sustainable world.

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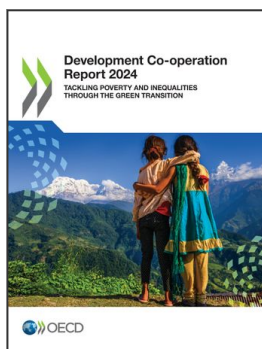
## Notes

[1] For example, a 2022 report noted that anti-poverty policies at home, often unpopular, may resonate more with the British public if they are instead framed as efforts to provide equal opportunities given "widespread public sympathy for those perceived to be denied opportunities" (Hewlett et al., 2022[38]).

[2] DAC Peer Reviews: https://doi.org/10.1787/23097132.

[3] GENE Peer Reviews: https://www.gene.eu/peer-reviews.

[4] See also the GENE knowledge platform: https://knowledge.gene.eu and the ANGEL GEL Global Education Research GEL database.

[5] For more on GENE's work in networking policy makers across Europe see: www.gene.eu. For more on research in this field, consult the work of ANGEL: www.angel-network.net.