



Aliza Belman Inbal

# The Case for International Aid

**A**S SENIOR PEARS FELLOW FOR INTERNATIONAL Development at Tel Aviv University’s School of Government and Policy, I’ve been spending a lot of time since Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman’s departure to Africa explaining why it is important that Israel substantially increase its foreign aid budget.

I thought it would be an easy sell. After all, Israel gives less money – as a percentage of our Gross National Income – to development assistance and emergency aid than any other developed country. We give only one fifth of the average given by OECD donor countries. We give a smaller percentage than Turkey, Poland, Hungary or South Korea.

Government funding for MASHAV, the Foreign Ministry department responsible for our development cooperation, was less than \$10 million in 2007 and Israel’s total bilateral aid less than \$20 million. In the same year, Portugal, with an economy only slightly larger than Israel’s, allocated \$270 million dollars to bilateral aid.

Yet, after many interviews, discussions and debates, I have found few people in Israel receptive to the idea that we ought to do more to aid countries struggling to emerge from poverty. I did, however, hear many reasons for not doing more to alleviate global suffering.

“Israel is justified in giving less foreign aid than other countries because we need a large defense budget.”

Israel’s defense budget, which accounts for almost 20 percent of our total government budget, is indeed large. We spend well over 50 billion shekels (\$13.2b.) a year on defense. In fact, by allocating the equivalent of less than one-quarter of one percent of the defense budget, Israel could quadruple MASHAV’s budget and significantly enhance its contribution to combating famine and starvation, lowering infant mortality and empowering impoverished women to better support their families.

“Our first obligation should be to the poor of Israel.”

When the media are filled every day with stories of the growing gaps between Israel’s rich and poor, our failing health system, children with inadequate schooling and families that cannot afford to have a chicken on their table on Shabbat, there is no doubt that we have an urgent need to take better care of the weaker segments of our own society. However, as in the case of our defense budget, the amount Israel spends on aid is minute in relation to how much it spends on welfare. Moreover, we can be thankful that, of the 30,000 children that die in the world every day from poverty-related causes, none of them are in Israel. Israelis, unlike a quarter of the world’s population, have electricity; and unlike a third of the world’s population, we have access to adequate water and sanitation.

It would be wrong, though, to assume that we have to choose between helping needy people in Israel and helping the far needier global poor. Countries that give more money to help the global poor also tend to take

far better care of their own poor. The true choice is whether we wish to be a compassionate society that works to combat poverty and inequality or not.

“Why should we give to countries that vote against us in the United Nations?”

Israel today gives so little development aid, at least in part, because nearly all African countries severed diplomatic relations with Israel in the wake of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. In MASHAV’s early days, Israel had, per capita, one of the most extensive technical assistance programs in the world, despite the fact that Israel was at the time itself a developing country, facing economic, social and security challenges far greater than the ones that it faces today.

Between 1958 and 1973, Israel dispatched over 5,000 experts in fields such as agriculture, water management, medicine and rural development to help build capacity in other developing countries. In 1963, when Israel’s entire GDP was only a little over \$2 billion, MASHAV’s budget was over \$5 million (in current terms) and MASHAV was the largest department in the Foreign Ministry. Today, while Israel’s GDP is almost 100 times as large, MASHAV’s budget has not even doubled from its 1963 levels.

Aid does not buy votes in the U.N. and does not counteract the influence of oil-rich states like Iran and Libya. However, that does not mean that foreign aid has no impact on Israel’s international standing. In recent years, as international development has risen to the top of the global agenda, the giving of aid has become a virtual prerequisite for entry into the club of enlightened industrial nations. By not giving even minimally acceptable levels of aid, Israel is defying the standards that all other democratic, developed countries have taken upon themselves.

Moreover, Israel is missing an opportunity to use aid in order to enhance its image. In the early days of Israel’s aid program, it had an international reputation as a valuable source of expertise on development. Israel was consistently praised in U.N. and OECD reports as a model of rapid development and as an important contributor of expertise to developing countries. Today, Israel still has unique expertise, which can be harnessed to solve some of the most urgent problems of poor countries: desert agriculture, disaster preparedness, water management, to name only a few areas. Increasing Israel’s contribution in these important fields would enable it to improve its image worldwide.

With Lieberman’s return from Africa, Israel stands at a crossroads. We can continue to look inward, closing ourselves off from the suffering of the world’s poor. Or we can revitalize our aid program, restoring Israel’s standing as a positive force for change in the world and her position as a light unto the nations.

**Aliza Belman Inbal is co-author, with Shachar Zehavi, of “The Rise and Fall of Israel’s Bilateral Aid Budget, 1958-2008.”**

