

Norwegian aid debate spring 2024

Below are a few examples from the aid debate in Norway this spring (updated late May 2024) – get in touch (eirik@langsikt.no) for more information or more examples, including newer ones.

Everything is machine translated, so please ignore anything that doesn't make sense or just seems wrong.

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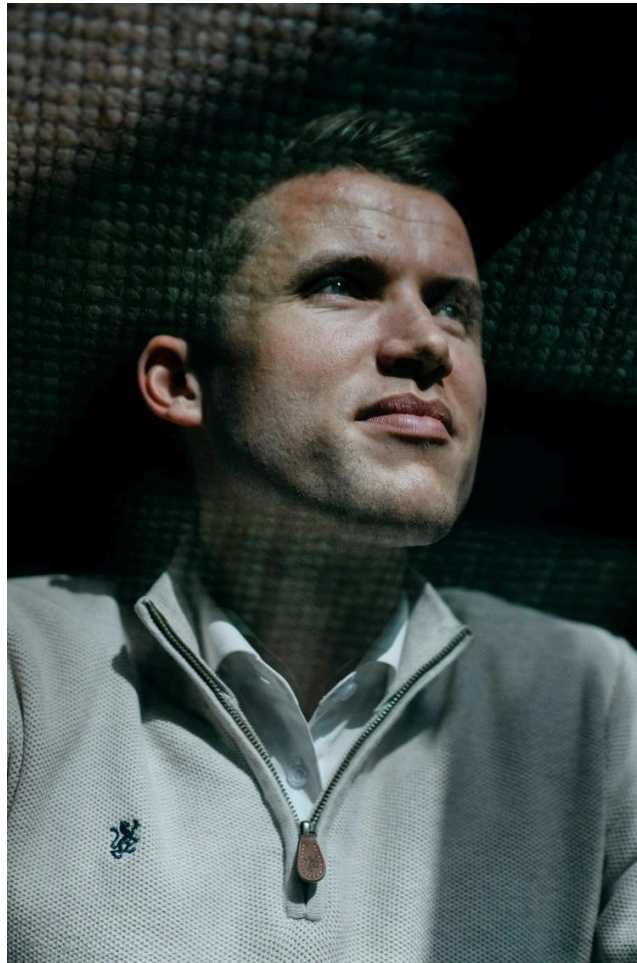
[Interview with the Director of Norad's director general: "Politicians Decide Everything and Are Responsible for Everything"](#)

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Interview with Eirik Mofoss: Norwegian aid policy cannot be defended

<https://www.morgenbladet.no/aktuelt/2024/03/01/eirik-mofoss-norsk-bistand-lar-seg-ikke-forsvare/> (paywalled and in Norwegian, but Google Translated to English below)



The disillusioned altruist: Eirik Mofoss, known for his "effective altruism", came to Norad with high hopes of contributing to making Norwegian aid more effective, but was disappointed when faced with the political realities .

— Norwegian aid policy cannot be defended

The authorities certainly don't care about the facts, says Eirik Mofoss. In frustration, he has quit his job as policy director at Norad and is now taking a strong stand against Norwegian aid policy.

By Jon Kåre Time and Katinka Hustad (photo)

It is gross when [Prime Minister] Jonas Gahr Støre says that *the Norwegian people* stand up in solidarity with Ukraine when he announces new aid packages. He does this knowing that the money we give is actually taken from the poor in Africa.

That's what Eirik Mofoss says, who until a month ago was one of the specialist directors in Norad, the directorate that manages 30 of the around 50 billion kroner that Norway annually spends on aid of various kinds. The purpose is to contribute to "a green future in a world without poverty".

Throughout his two years at Norad, however, Mofoss became increasingly frustrated with the politicians' and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' management of Norad and Norwegian aid. Now he believes that he can do more for the world's poor by working full-time as managing director of Langsikt, a think tank for "long-term policy" that he himself helped to establish last year.

In this interview, Mofoss criticizes Norwegian aid policy along several lines, including:

- The support for Ukraine comes largely from the aid budget, and Mofoss says this in practice is taking away money that would otherwise have been used for poverty alleviation and development in Africa.
- Norad's core task has been to fight poverty. But projects that are effective in achieving this are now being sacrificed for investments in, for example, climate, environment, peace and security.
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) continues to fight for their current exemption from a government guideline that requires clear reasoning for why one chooses to support one project rather than others. He believes that this leads to less efficient spending of money.
- The current system makes it too easy for politicians to spend money on matters of their own heart and to lubricate the larger foreign policy machinery.
- It is not clear why such a large part of the Norwegian aid funds must be channeled through Norwegian organisations, such as the Church's Emergency Aid and Norwegian People's Aid, rather than organizations from other countries.

The altruist who came in from the cold

Mofoss is best known to the public as a pioneer in effective altruism, a sometimes controversial school of thought and idealistic movement concerned with how to do the most good possible with the resources you have, based on a scientific and rational approach. He helped found the foundation Give Effectively and has told about how he himself gives away 20 percent of his income to the organizations he believes are the most cost-effective. In 2022, he was named "Leading Star of the Year" in Dagens Næringsliv.

It was with this idealistic starting point that Mofoss came to Norad two years ago, after he had worked for a period as fiscal policy advisor for the Conservative Party's parliamentary group. Director Bård Vegar Solhjell had already launched the slogan "facts have power"

and announced that in future they would base themselves even more on systematic knowledge of what works best.

That Norway should give around one percent of gross national income (GNI) to aid has been a leading principle since the 1970s. This, Mofoss thought, would make it possible to manage the money in the best possible way because you then don't have to think about which projects will get people to open the Vipps app in fundraising campaigns.

Mofoss quickly rose through the ranks, from advisor to policy director, but was nevertheless dissatisfied with what he experienced:

- I went from a political job to what I thought was a professional job, but I was disappointed by how much politics there was. In practice, much of the aid is governed by political matters of the heart, foreign policy considerations and the interests of the media, Mofoss believes.

Others have criticized the strategy that "facts should have the power" to accommodate a narrow view of knowledge, but Mofoss believes Norad is on the right course here. The problem is that both the politicians and Norad's superiors in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs make it difficult to reach the goal.

- It is easy for politicians to dismiss professional advice. But as the leader of a political think tank, I can now challenge them in a way that would have been inappropriate when I was a bureaucrat, says Mofoss.

The reverse Robin Hood

The crowning example of what is wrong, according to Mofoss, is the way the aid to Ukraine is financed: The 7.5 billion Norway gives annually through the Nansen program is taken from the aid budget - and it is done within the "one percent". He believes this means that the money would otherwise have gone to developing countries. Thus, it is indirectly the poorest who pay for it, he says.

- Ukraine could easily get ten times more, it would be both in our security policy self-interest and morally correct. But now I feel that the government is stealing money from Africa.

He therefore believes that the Ukraine aid should not have been part of the aid budget.

- We pride ourselves on the fact that we are the country which, according to the government's own way of calculating, gives the most to Ukraine per inhabitant. But the truth is that we are not really standing up for Ukraine. The politicians take the money from the world's poorest, not from Norwegian taxpayers, but they fail to tell that this is what is happening, says Mofoss.

- When I tell people where the Ukraine money comes from, they are shocked, all as one. No one has heard of it before!

Development Minister Tinnereim flatly rejects this. It has been possible to support Ukraine without reallocating funds from the poor because the aid budget has increased in

NOK (see separate interview). It is "unworthy" to pit Ukraine and developing countries against each other in this way, she says.

According to Mofoss, the picture is made even worse by the fact that Norway has had extraordinary income due to the war. According to Faktisk.no, the additional income from the sale of gas amounts to over NOK 1,000 billion extra in 2022 alone.

- In total, we are talking about a couple of thousand billion. We have also earned some of that by selling gas to Ukraine. Norway is running a reverse Robin Hood tactic where we become even richer than we were before, while at the same time taking from the poor, says Mofoss.

The criticism primarily affects the politicians. But the civil service also has something to answer for, believes the recently resigned bureaucrat, because they have not made it clear that the prioritization of Ukraine is justified in terms of aid.

- Given that the purpose of Norwegian aid is to combat poverty, this is impossible to defend in a purely academic sense. Ten times more aid is given to Ukraine than to Ethiopia, even though there have been just as many deaths in the bloody war there. Now there are also warnings of an impending famine. It surprises me that this can happen in a professional directorate, he says.

Aid 2.0?

The criticism from Mofoss adds to a debate that is now raging in aid circles after Norad director Solhjell in January launched what he called *Bistand 2.0* in *Morgenbladet* - a new development policy that emphasizes climate measures and other worldwide problems that it is in our own interest to fix. In UN jargon, this is called "global commons".

Solhjell wrote that the investment in this had to come "on top of" traditional aid, but the outcome has nevertheless caused concern: Could the outcome soon be that the mandate is extended *without* additional money? Then the poorest will suffer for our green views.

To this, Solhjell has replied that the problem is that the aid budget is already being used for "quite a lot of things" that are not the most effective for the core mandate: "Growth comes from climate, Ukraine and refugee expenses", he writes in *Panorama* - that is precisely why he believes it is important to have a separate, juxtaposed commitment to global common goods.

Solhjell's plan stems in part from the advice of a government-appointed expert group led by Nupi researcher Ole Jacob Sending, who last year submitted the report "Investing in a common future". A key point was that the aid budget should not only be increased, but also split in two. It should be clear what is about global common goods and what is traditional aid. In this way, it also becomes easier to set clear goals for the projects and to assess their effects.

Mofoss reacts to the fact that Development Minister Anne Beathe Tvinneheim has rejected the proposal. In an article in *Panorama*, she explains that the dichotomy does not

capture the complex interrelationships that aid projects are part of: A good project can *both* reduce poverty *and* be good for the climate.

- I understand the need to see things in context, but some goals are in conflict with each other. It becomes almost impossible to prioritize if you have too many objectives at once, says Mofoss.

A diluted term: the 1 percent

Norad itself, in a reply to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which Morgenbladet has seen, made it clear that they interpret the Sending committee to mean that the Nansen program for Ukraine "should be taken in addition to an ordinary aid budget of 1 percent of GNI, so that the program does not come at the expense of long-term assistance to the poorest." The Directorate has also calculated that if you take away investments in global common goods, you are left with just 0.56 per cent of GNI for international development in 2022 – far from one per cent.

But Mofoss points out that the Norad figures show that it is actually worse: If you also take away what goes to emergency aid in humanitarian crises, you are left with only 0.37 per cent of GNI for 2022 for aid aimed at long-term poverty reduction.

Mofoss believes that it has been important for the politicians to put as much as possible into the aid budget in order to achieve the one percent target. Norway adheres to generous rules from the OECD, which allow, among other things, the costs of refugees' first year in Norway to be included in the aid budget. Now, however, the Støre government has taken it even further. From 2024, support for global security and nuclear disarmament will also be included - something the OECD does not accept as aid.

- According to the government's logic, we could also include the costs of subsidizing electric cars here in Norway in the aid budget - after all, it contributes to global greenhouse gas cuts, says Mofoss.

Diplomats versus professionals?

Mofoss dreams of a Norad that can be loyal to the purpose of poverty reduction and that can clearly mark what they believe is the most effective way of spending money to achieve this.

- Most of the positions that are financed from the aid budget are actually in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. People go to the diplomatic school there, and the most important thing they learn there is – put at the top – to be loyal to their superiors and to the political leadership. I think that makes them afraid to convey what they actually mean. They close their eyes to professional advice, says Mofoss.

- Even if someone has worked hard for "facts to have power", then power does not necessarily get to see the full facts. Then it will be easier for politicians to implement major changes and push through initiatives that no one can defend professionally.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that aid is currently exempt from the so-called [Instructions for Official Studies](#), which apply everywhere else in the state. This requires that you have to explain a number of questions *before* major grants. The Sending committee believes that a similar rule should also apply to aid.

Morgenbladet has been given access to Norad's response to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on this point, and here it appears that the Directorate supports the Sending Committee's recommendation on such an instruction. They do *not fear* that it will create an increased "administrative burden", quite the contrary. However, Mofoss currently sees few signs that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and political leadership will follow up on this, and he interprets this as political reluctance to allow the professionals in Norad to do their job properly.

- If I had become development minister tomorrow and had asked why we distribute aid the way we do, I would not get a good answer from the civil service. There are documents that show that those we give to are not corrupt, and perhaps something about the results they have achieved, but there are rarely archived preliminary assessments that explain why we granted the money, says Mofoss.

The good against the good

This again points to what Mofoss believes is the main problem: There is too little open discussion about why money is given to a good cause rather than another.

- My most important issue in Norad was that we must dare to put things up against each other, that we must talk about *opportunity costs*. I got some internal resistance, but it was worse at the political level. I think it is because there are many things we do today, which then become impossible to defend, says Mofoss.

Nor are these completely unknown thoughts internally at Norad. In the dialogue with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the directorate has also explained the need to work more systematically with opportunity costs and analyzes of cost effectiveness, including through more use of benchmarks for efficiency.

However, Mofoss believes that several of today's ventures will come out poorly from such comparisons.

For example, over the next five years, Norad will spend NOK 1 billion on operating *the Fridtjof Nansen*, an expensive research ship heavily laden with national prestige and high technology which, among other things, surveys fish stocks in African waters. Mofoss says this should immediately have been cut from the aid budget because evaluations indicate that it neither contributes to poverty reduction nor improved food security. Also, a larger investment in preventing marine littering could have been cut in favor of documented effective poverty measures.

Mofoss also mentions current development minister and former Norad bureaucrat Tvinnereim's heart child: A major investment in food security, including through supporting small farmers and fishermen in developing countries.

- Agriculture is important for reducing poverty, but this is nevertheless an ideologically motivated investment that has been rapidly scaled up at the same time as major cuts have been made in education and other measures. The rapid increase is not justified in terms of aid, Mofoss believes.

Direct financial support

Two years ago, both Director Solhjell and Knowledge Director Håvard Mogleiv Nygård stepped forward and declared with great enthusiasm that a greater proportion of Norwegian aid should be channeled through direct cash transfers to the poor. It was in line with the new slogan, because here *the evidence should* be more solid than for most other measures.

- But has it happened? No! Institutions such as the World Bank and the World Food Program, on the other hand, have adapted to the new knowledge quickly. I think they manage such changes because they have a greater distance from the politicians, says Mofoss.

While some others are concerned that Norwegian aid is increasingly being channeled via the World Bank and other global giants who are often perceived as market liberals, Mofoss believes that this is, on the contrary, progress.

- International institutions manage to a greater extent to detach themselves from short-term and populist priorities, and they are more subject-oriented than we are.

A fire torch

The focus on opportunity costs also forces an even more controversial thought: Why should so much money go to Church Aid, Norwegian People's Aid and other small and large organizations with addresses in Norway? We have to have the debate, says Mofoss.

There is much that could be objected to here: In contrast to, for example, the World Bank, the Norwegian organizations are subject to a strict control regime by Norad. These are also organizations that the Norwegian administration understands and knows well, and which often have large networks and deep relationships in the countries where they are active. Not least, they also have private donors, which helps to anchor Norwegian aid policy in the population.

- *How big do you think the aid budget would have been without the efforts Dagfinn Høybråten in the Church's Aid and others have put in to raise awareness among both people and politicians?*

- It is true that they do a great deal of information work; they create commitment and they are important watchdogs. But there should be greater political honesty around this. We should say straight out that it is a separate goal to maintain a large civil aid sector here at home, says Mofoss.

Eradicate malaria

As an example of something Norway should prioritize much higher, Mofoss mentions a new malaria vaccine, R21, which was approved by the WHO last autumn. It will quickly be

able to save hundreds of thousands of African children's lives if it gets enough funding, he believes.

- There are good enough indications that the vaccine is effective enough that Norway should invest several billion in financing the rollout, he says.

It's about seizing a new opportunity to eradicate malaria, he emphasizes. 600,000 die annually, 250 million become ill.

- This should be the biggest priority globally. But since this is not on the newspaper front pages, it won't be like that, he says.

A major investment in malaria medicine would also be in line with a proud Norwegian tradition, he points out. Vaccination programs for children in poor countries have been an area of focus ever since Norwegian Tore Godal helped establish the vaccine alliance Gavi in 2000.

- It is global health that Norway can really do, and this is where we should invest more. Especially now that the work on this is on the back burner after the pandemic, says Eirik Mofoss.

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Facts: AID DEBATE

- *On 5 January, Norad director Bård Vegar Solhjell launched the idea of Aid 2.0 in Morgenbladet - a new form of aid that also addresses the ever-increasing needs for measures against climate change and other "global common goods" that it is in our own interest to solve.*
- *There has been a concern that the growing need to invest in, among other things, climate measures will eventually outpace aid to poor countries. In the report "Investing in a common future", a government-appointed expert group has recommended a clearer distinction between traditional aid and global common goods. Now the debate is raging in aid circles about whether this is a good idea.*
- *Eirik Mofoss has worked for two years as an aid bureaucrat in Norad, most recently as a policy director. He quit a month ago, and in this interview advocates a number of changes in Norwegian aid policy.*

Reply from the Minister of Development: Unworthy



Must prioritise: Development Minister Anne Beathe Tvinnereim (Sp) faces opposition from Eirik Mofoss, who has recently resigned as technical director at Norad. Here she is at the podium during the Norad conference earlier this year.

— Misunderstood, unworthy and wrong
The Minister for Development denies that Ukraine aid has gone beyond the world's poorest. Mofoss does not understand the relationship between politics and trade unionism, says Anne Beathe Tvinnereim.

By Jon Kåre Time

Development Minister Anne Beathe Tvinnereim (Sp) is surprised by the criticism from Eirik Mofoss, and reacts strongly to the claim that support for Ukraine has gone beyond the world's poor elsewhere.

- This is wrong. We have *not* reallocated money from poverty alleviation in the global south to be able to pay for the Nansen programme, she says.

She explains that there have been more kroner in the aid budget, as gross national income (GNI) has increased at the same time that the target of giving approximately 1 per cent of this has remained fixed. Thus, it has been possible *both* to find money for the Nansen program for Ukraine and the expenses for the refugees from there *and* to increase the budgeted support for the rest of the world by over NOK 2 billion from 2022 to 2024, measured in nominal figures.

- So I have to say that it is a somewhat undignified exercise to pit such important - and tragic - purposes against each other. It goes without saying that we should contribute everything we can to Ukraine, and I am glad that we have found room for maneuver in the aid budget.

Tvinnereim says that it is not unnatural to count large parts of the civil support for Ukraine as aid. The country was approved in international forums as an aid country even before the war.

- At the same time, it has been very important for me to maintain the commitment to combating poverty, and I am happy that Norway is one of the few rich countries that manages to reach the international goal of giving 0.2 percent of GNI to the world's poorest countries, she says.

- So there was enough money this year because Norway had unusually large incomes. So what do we do this year when Norway has more normal incomes?

- In a situation where the gross national income (GNI) were to fall, the aid budget in terms of NOK will also be smaller. Then we may have to change priorities in order to deliver on the Storting's promises to Ukraine through the Nansen programme. I hope we don't have to make this priority. The needs also in other crises are record high, says Tvinnereim.

- As development minister, I have to make difficult choices every single day, that's my job. At the same time, I would like to remind you that there has been agreement throughout that the support to Ukraine will constitute a significant contribution within the one percent target for aid.

Expert rule against democracy

The Minister of Development, who from 2014 to 2018 was deputy director of Norad himself, also has strong objections to the overall thinking at Mofoss.

- It sounds like he wants a rule of experts, a purely technocratic aid administration that can continue in peace, disconnected from politics. It is misunderstood, it is unworthy and it is wrong. If there is one thing we have learned after seven decades of Norwegian aid, it is that there are no simple answers to what is optimal. I deeply disagree with this belief that there is some kind of conclusion, she says.

She refers to the experiences of "everyone who works on the ground in a developing country": Good aid work requires in-depth country knowledge, a deep understanding of the context and the ability to collaborate with local partners.

- I can't count how many times I have sat in meetings at Norad and heard one expert after another - on health, on education, on agriculture - beat each other over the head with figures about what is most important. But this is far too complex for a perfect solution to be expected, says Tvinnereim.

She does not think Mofoss has taken on board how the relationship between politics and administration should work.

- Aid is politics, and in a democracy you have to have a mandate from the people to do it, she says and continues:

- As politicians, it is our damned duty to prioritize. It's pretty brutal sometimes, and I hope Mofoss or anyone else doesn't think we do it lightly. But technocracy is not a viable alternative.

- *Doesn't your criticism of the technocratic way of thinking partly also affect the high-pitched rhetoric that "facts should have power", which we have continuously heard from Norad in recent years?*

- No, the aid field is no different to other political areas. The professionals must manage and provide us with a good knowledge base before decisions are made. In that way, "facts have power". But the bureaucracy should not decide. Finally, the budget priorities are and must be political. Then an overall view is needed, which the experts do not always have.

Food security on the agenda

The political priorities are extra difficult in a world in record rapid change, with war, the climate crisis and rising food prices, Tvinnereim asserts. Here, the investment in food security, for which she herself has been at the forefront, can serve as an example. This was a neglected field for a long time, but now Tvinnereim believes that more and more people are seeing how important it is. Food safety is high on the agenda in the G20, and Norwegian policy in the area is to be one of the reasons why Norway has been invited as a guest country.

- Mofoss seems to reduce this to being about supporting fishermen and small farmers, but it is about so much more - from nutrition to security policy. It doesn't make sense to compare it to other good purposes in such a simplistic way, says Tvinnereim.

Regarding the Sending committee's recommendation to introduce something that corresponds to the Instructions for Official Studies also in aid, the minister says that it is something she will consider when Norad's own assessment of the matter comes to her desk.

Mofoss, like the Sending Committee, will separate investment in climate measures and other global common goods that are in our own interest from traditional aid. But he also fears that aid is being used to a large extent to lubricate the foreign policy machinery. According to the minister, however, there is not necessarily a problem if Norwegian aid sometimes also has other functions than only fulfilling declared objectives of, for example, combating poverty.

- That's the way the world is. I think we should even allow ourselves to say that much of the work against poverty in developing countries is also in our own interest. For example: When we invest in food security in the Horn of Africa, we contribute to less migration, there is less unrest. It contributes to Norwegian security in the long run, says Tvinnereim.

Followup responses and media coverage

Here are some examples of media coverage after my interview, leading to the largest debate on Norwegian aid in many years (mostly paywalled, and not including different aspects brought into the debate):

- [The Norwegian Church Aid \(NCA\) and CARE: Aid is politics](#)
- [CARE's general secretary: The debate on aid targets cannot be left to the technocrats alone.](#)
- [Save the Children, NCA and MP Kaski: The rule of action that can change Norwegian aid](#)
- [Civita: Norwegian aid must be sharpened](#)
- [The Minister concluded before the expert committee's recommendation was thoroughly assessed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, says Øyvind Eggen](#) (Panorama, very long case)
- [Øyvind Eggen: Norwegian aid is unable to prioritize](#)
- [Norad: We don't stare blindly at spreadsheets](#) (positive to my criticism, 7000 characters long)
- [Effective aid requires clear and unambiguous goals](#) – an op-ed as from the [government appointed expert group on foreign aid from 2023](#) as response to the debate and comments from the Minister of Foreign Affairs (to the first interview)
-plus more. See the next two pieces below with Norad and Eirik Mofoss

Interview with the Director of Norad (the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation) Bård Vegar Solhjell: "Politicians Decide Everything and Are Responsible for Everything"

<https://www.morgenbladet.no/aktuelt/2024/04/11/norad-sjefen-politikerne-bestemmer-alt-og-har-ansvar-for-alt/> (behind paywall and in Norwegian, but ChatGPT-translated below)

Bård Vegar Solhjell is fine with not getting his way in the big aid debate, but in the long run, he believes the last word has not been said.

"At no point in my lifetime has the gap between needs and aid funds been greater," says Bård Vegar Solhjell as Morgenbladet visits him at Norad's offices at Solli plass in Oslo. Since 2020, he has been responsible for managing about 30 of the approximately 50 billion NOK in the Norwegian aid budget.

He is summarizing the major aid debate that has been ongoing since he presented a new vision for Norwegian aid policy in January in this newspaper through the op-ed "Aid Because We Benefit From It." This sparked an extensive discussion on how Norwegian aid can be best structured and also drew sharp criticism of the way the Ministry of Foreign Affairs manages Norad and the direction Solhjell has outlined for the agency.

"The need for emergency aid is exploding," continues Solhjell. "At the same time, we could have spent many times the Norwegian aid budget on international climate measures alone."

The goal of the original statement was precisely to create a discussion about this dilemma, he explains: How can we think together about the urgent need to raise more money for international climate measures while continuing the traditional work of reducing poverty and contributing to economic growth in developing countries?

Solhjell himself advocated for a new aid policy he called "Aid 2.0": A committed focus on climate and other global problems "on top of" the work to fight poverty. To achieve this, both fresh state funds and much more private financing would be needed.

But most importantly, Solhjell wanted to reorganize Norwegian aid. He argued for splitting aid into two, creating a clear distinction between the work to reduce poverty and new initiatives on climate and other "global public goods" that are also in our own interest.

Solhjell was not alone in this. He pointed to the clear recommendation from a government-appointed expert committee led by Nupi researcher Ole Jacob Sending. The

committee believes such a division is necessary to establish clear goals for aid work. This is needed to make clear priorities and find the most effective means. It is also necessary to highlight goal conflicts. If the goal is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, completely different measures are often best than if the goal is to reduce poverty. Today, however, the system is more geared towards trying to achieve many goals in each individual project.

"My advice to those who formulate policy would be to discuss these issues openly and thoughtfully," wrote Solhjell.

But how did it go? Development Minister Anne Beathe Tvinnereim quickly rejected the proposal for a division. "We don't get more development by creating more silos," the minister wrote in the online newspaper Panorama. No, according to her, it was more about seeing "the fight against poverty and climate change even more closely related."

It was "unusual" to have such a public discussion between ministers and agency heads, noted former Minister of Climate and Environment Vidar Helgesen in Panorama. Others have questioned whether the proposal for division was even thoroughly considered by Tvinnereim before it was dismissed.

Norad Defectors with Strong Criticism

The relationship between professional advice and politics became a focal point when Norad's former director of professional services, Eirik Mofoss, now head of the think tank Langsikt, launched a high-caliber broadside against Norwegian aid in March.

Mofoss highlighted that both support for Ukraine, refugee expenses, and climate increasingly consume a pot of money that might otherwise have gone to the poor in Africa. He also claimed that politicians and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs do not listen to Norad's advice on what are the most knowledge-based and cost-effective measures, but instead "push through" new initiatives without explaining them in terms of aid expertise. Mofoss believed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was part of the problem because the diplomatically trained bureaucrats there often stand between Norad and political leadership. Thus, facts do not always reach those in power.

"In practice, much of the aid is governed by political pet projects, foreign policy considerations, and media interests," claimed Mofoss.

Development Minister Tvinnereim, however, responded that it was an "undignified exercise" to pit good purposes against each other, and accused Mofoss of not understanding the relationship between politics and bureaucracy:

"It sounds like he wants a technocracy, an entirely technocratic aid administration that operates undisturbed, disconnected from politics. That is misunderstood, undignified, and wrong," she said.

Mofoss, however, received support from another former Norad top, aid veteran Øyvind Eggen. He had just left his job as head of Norad's Knowledge Bank to establish the online magazine Anonyme Byråkrater. According to Eggen, it is "scandalous" that major decisions in aid are not better justified than today. He believes that Norwegian aid does not manage to prioritize, largely due to a "detached belief that all good purposes are interconnected." For example, a climate measure might be justified by also reducing poverty, even if it is not particularly effective at this – precisely the kind of situation Sending's committee proposal aimed to counteract.

"It Can Be Better Than Today"

Solhjell says he is glad that Mofoss and Eggen are participating in the debate.

"I don't agree with them on everything, for example, I don't think decisions about allocations and new priorities are 'scandalously' poorly justified. But yes, it can be better than today. That's why I started the debate in the first place," says Solhjell.

The Norad director also says he sees the relationship between politics and professional bureaucracy differently than his two former colleagues. For example, he thought it was "completely okay" and "easy to accept" that Tvinnereim quickly stated that the proposal for division would not be followed, despite Eggen's claim that the recommendation was not even thoroughly considered in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"It is the politicians' responsibility to decide. That they sometimes decide early, or even have decided in advance, is entirely natural. They should be able to disagree with a professional view. That's called democracy," says Solhjell.

He says he prefers politicians who clearly clarify and explain their positions, rather than those who do not participate in the discussion.

"So I am completely fine with this decision. But I don't think the underlying issues will disappear."

"What Are You Referring to Then?"

"It's about the gap between what we have decided we should achieve in terms of climate and poverty, and the money we have available. And it's about recognizing that goal

conflicts arise in aid. If I get 100 kroner to reduce poverty and 100 kroner for climate, we will choose different projects. Today, this is mixed together," says Solhjell.

"Both Eirik Mofoss and Øyvind Eggen describe a situation where the relationship between Norad and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not always work well, and where it can be uncertain whether professional recommendations from Norad actually reach the politicians. Is this something you recognize?"

"I recognize it, but they exaggerate. I have a greater acceptance than them that it doesn't always go as we have suggested. I have been a politician myself and understand well all the other considerations the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the minister must take," says Solhjell.

He says he actually experiences that Norad "to a large extent" is listened to in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"They have great respect for our advice. But where I think Mofoss and Eggen have a point is that I find that in aid we have a less developed culture for using professional advice and knowledge about what has the best effect, early in decision-making processes than in other policy areas such as transport and health policy," says Solhjell.

"We now have a lot of knowledge, both from modern quantitative and qualitative methods, and I think we have more to go on to use this to achieve the politically determined goals for aid policy," he says.

Facts Have the Power

Over his four years at Norad, Solhjell has emphasized that aid must become more knowledge-based and cost-effective – all under the controversial confession that "facts have the power." But what opportunities does the professional agency Norad really have to influence priorities in aid policy?

In the annual directive from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the so-called allocation letter, it is strictly stated that "Norad must notify the Ministry of Foreign Affairs early and clearly about matters that involve proposals for new policies or policies under development."

Solhjell says he "of course" had notified his superiors in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in advance of the initiative about "Aid 2.0."

"My experience with ministries is that they like strong professional agencies, but not surprises," says Solhjell.

The allocation letter is long and detailed, with extensive lists of how much money should be spent on various areas. And even within the posts, the messages can be very specific:

"Particular emphasis should be placed on small-scale food producers," it says, for example, about food security and hunger reduction.

"Politicians decide everything and are responsible for everything. If that's what they want, they can micromanage. That's how it should be in a democracy. But there is slightly different practice between ministers and departments," says Solhjell.

- "How Do You Think It Should Be Done?"

- "My personal ideal is that goals and values are decided politically, while professional expertise governs the means. Is it, for example, most important to cut climate emissions or to reduce poverty south of the Sahara? Is food security more important than education? These are political and value questions without a clear professional answer. But if you tell me to prioritize cutting emissions, I can say a lot about how it can be done most effectively," says Solhjell.

- "Would you like Norad to have more power to choose the measures you believe are the most effective within each area?"

"Well, then I think we could get more value for every krone. It's important that politicians decide, but we could certainly be better at openly discussing excluding some measures in favor of means that are documented to be more effective. Here I wish Norad had even more room to give advice, or decide within clear political frameworks."

"This seems to be a prerequisite for your project for Norad – that facts should have power?"

"We should build on the best available knowledge, but that doesn't mean I believe there are facts that can determine policy. But with better preliminary assessments, it becomes easier to choose measures and means that effectively achieve the political goals," says Solhjell.

Thus, We Move to Another Hot Potato in This Aid Debate

The so-called investment instruction. Sending's committee believes that within aid, as in all other parts of the state, one should be required to account for a set of fixed questions before allocating large sums of money. This way, it becomes easier to follow up on what preliminary assessments are actually made when the millions disappear. Both Mofoss and Eggen, and not least Norad itself, have supported this proposal, but the signals from Tvinnereim have been unclear. Solhjell, however, can now confirm that he has "received signals that it will go more in that direction."

Although Solhjell overall will not get his "Aid 2.0" this time, he predicts that the discussion will return.

"Morgenbladet managed to start an important debate. And I am sure we will gradually talk more and more about how we can use other means – and much more money – on global issues," believes Solhjell.

"My guess is that Norwegian aid policy will be very different in ten years."

Op-ed from Eirik Mofoss: The Emergency Room where your Friends are treated first

<https://www.morgenbladet.no/ideer/debatt/2024/05/12/eirik-mofoss-norsk-bistand-er-som-en-legevakt-hvor-venner-behandles-forst/> (paywalled and in Norwegian, but ChatGPT translated below – here is the [original text in Norwegian](#) without paywall)

Norwegian foreign aid is like an emergency room where friends are treated first, and the Minister of Health decides what treatment to give.

Imagine an emergency room where the waiting room is crowded with patients with various problems. Some conditions are acute, others just painful. In the queue are both children and adults, friends and strangers, the poor and the rich. It is absolutely necessary to prioritize who should get help first. Whether you start with those who came in first, those in the most pain, or the oldest, you make a choice. Consciously or unconsciously, you make a prioritization. And how you prioritize matters a lot.

In the healthcare system, we have clear priorities for who should get help first. In aid, however, good prioritizations are rare.

In an interview with Morgenbladet on March 1, I criticized how the government is increasingly using Norwegian aid for measures in Norway's interests, instead of the original purpose of aid: to reduce global poverty. Additionally, I criticized the government for not prioritizing the most effective measures based on expert advice.

Choices and Exclusions

On Tuesday this week, Norad published statistics on Norwegian aid in 2023. The figures show that almost as much aid went to Ukraine – a single country – as to the entire African continent: While African countries received 10.2 billion NOK in total, Ukraine received 7.9 billion. An additional nearly one billion went to measures in Moldova. Ironically, the second-largest recipient country of Norwegian aid was Norway itself, with 4.5 billion NOK, to finance the reception of primarily Ukrainian refugees.

Don't get me wrong. Ukraine should receive much more support than it does today, as Steinar Holden also argues in an interview with Morgenbladet last week. But – we help Ukraine because it is in our own interest to protect a neighbor under attack, not because the needs there are greater than in other countries. It is insane that we take the support for Ukraine from the aid budget, thus letting the poor in Africa pay the price for "Norwegian solidarity."

Development Minister Tvinoreim believes it is "undignified" of me to pit important purposes against each other. Here she shows a lack of understanding of what is the most

important job of politicians: namely, to prioritize society's scarce resources. Who should be prioritized highest, and what are our most important goals? Choices, and exclusions.

The Minister also warns against letting technocracy and expert rule control aid because aid, after all, is politics. Here I deeply disagree. As an illustration, let's return to the example of the emergency room. Of course, it is the politicians who decide which considerations should be emphasized in the healthcare system and what goals the emergency room has. But once patients come in for treatment, it is a professional question what treatment they should receive. This is determined by the doctor, not the Minister of Health.

Some aid measures are much more effective than others. There can be a 10 or 100 times difference in results achieved per krone spent. When I worked in Norad, I was nonetheless shocked at how often politicians let ideology and party-political interests take precedence over expert advice. For example: The Development Minister, from the Center Party, believes that supporting small farmers and food production is the most effective way to eradicate poverty. The previous government, however, believed that education was most effective. Both views are ideologically based, not knowledge-based.

Even Norway does not have enough resources for everything and everyone. It is a given that Norwegian politicians should decide what the goals of Norwegian aid are and what considerations should be taken. But when politicians also micromanage the choice of means and override expert advice, the poorest in the world have to pay the price. This includes girls in Tanzania who do not get an education or children in Ethiopia and Sudan who starve to death.

More for the Interventions That Work Best

Given that the overall purpose of aid is to contribute to economic and social development in developing countries – as decided by both the Parliament and internationally by the OECD, more Norwegian aid should go to the measures we believe work best for this. For example, vaccines, effective nutrition measures, school meals, and cash transfers to the extremely poor.

In some areas, there is professional disagreement about exactly what works best. Nevertheless, aid should never go to nuclear disarmament in Europe, security policy, or measures against plastic in the sea. Or as the government has done now: introducing tuition fees for international students, and then taking 100 million from the aid budget for education to subsidize some of them. The mentioned projects can be great and important, but for us here at home – not for people in poverty and hunger. They should also be funded by us here at home.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is part of the problem. Today, it is the only ministry that does not follow the government's Instructions for Official Studies. This instruction sets reasonable requirements for all public spending, including always clarifying what problem one wants to solve, what one wants to achieve, and what alternative solutions exist. It provides better use of society's resources.

Norwegian aid cannot do everything for everyone, but we can do an extremely great deal for very many. At least if politicians manage to prioritize and let knowledge trump ideology and short-term party-political interests. Or as Norad says: let facts have power.

National TV debate about aid policy (May 2nd)

May 2nd 2024: [The main national TV debate program in Norway](#) discussed Norwegian aid policy, inspired by the critique from Eirik Mofoss, with participants including the Minister of International Development, the Norad director general and others. This was the first time, possibly ever but at least in many years, that foreign aid was discussed on this show, and thus a debut for myself, the Minister, the Norad director general and others.

We discussed what aid should be spent on (and not), that money from the extreme poor is taken away to pay for our contributions to Ukraine, climate mitigation and refugee spending, how decision making in the Ministry is not evidence-based but very political (and that the MFA is actively fighting to continue being exempted by ordinary decision-making procedures in Norwegian government bodies meant to increase value for money), etc.



Eirik on the debate with the Minister of Int. Dev., a leading right-wing MP and gen.sec. of Plan International Norway