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Rich nations slow in helping poor: index

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A unique index that measures rich countries' commitments to help the poor reflects a slow overall improvement since 2003 but not nearly to levels promised as late as last year.

The "Commitment to Development Index" factors in rich countries' policies on trade, the environment and immigration alongside foreign aid that they give.

The top country in this year's survey, the Netherlands, ranked little more than average in four of seven categories rated for the index. It replaced last year's leader, Denmark, only because of a major fall in the Danes' rating. Holland's rating was 6.6, compared with 6.4 for Denmark.

Nancy Birdsall, president of the Center for Global Development, which compiles the index released on Sunday, said the new ratings show slow but steady improvement since the first index in 2003 but "fall far short of leaders' soaring rhetoric last year, the so-called `Year of Development.'"

British Prime Minister Tony Blair had made development aid to poor countries of Africa a major goal of Britain's chairmanship of the G8 developed countries last year. This past June, Blair acknowledged that major commitments made at last July's G8 meeting in Scotland remained unmet.

At the summit, the wealthy nations agreed to increase aid to Africa by US\$25 billion a year by 2010, and by a further US\$25 million each year by 2015. The summiteers also committed to write off US\$40 billion of 18 countries' debt.

The World Bank says they followed through on the debt write-offs, but at an actual cost of US \$650 million.

That is less than 1 percent of total aid. The rest of the US\$40 billion "was like forgiving the debt of a bankruptcy; you haven't had that money for a long time," said David Roodman, designer of the commitment index.

In the commitment index, which surveys 21 countries, Denmark dropped from first place for the first time since the index began. Its rating fell more than any other since the first index, from 6.7 last year to 6.4 this year, attributed to large reductions in foreign aid.

The US' rating was 5.0, identical to last year's, but its ranking, shared with Ireland, was down one place to 13th from last year's 12th. Japan's 3.1 rating put it in last place, where it has been since 2003.

Northern European countries, New Zealand and Australia dominated the list this year, as they have since the annual survey began.

"What we want to do with the index is to provide a pretty powerful road map that shows how all these kinds of policies matter. They are all the ways that rich countries hurt or help the poor," Roodman said in an interview.

"In general governments don't want to talk about this stuff. They want to hide, and we want to reveal," he said.

The ratings are averages of points assigned for each country's policies on the amount and quality of foreign aid it gives as well as the other policies.

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