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E.A. Brett

The Development and Challenges of Aid Relationships: Where Is International Aid Heading?¹



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The unity and stability of the global economic system has always depended on aid relationships that sustain the concessional transfers from rich donor countries to poor countries. These transfers depend on voluntary exchanges between sovereign governments, multilateral organizations, and civil society organizations and individuals, but they also form a partially coordinated system of aid relationships that impose real obligations on their participants, even if they are not subject to collective control and enforcement. This system of global

governance is coordinated by the IMF and World Bank (the IFIs), the UN, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD, development ministries in donor countries, the international NGO community, and their counterparts in recipient countries. It has been established to address a variety of threats caused by international inequality and exclusion, economic, political, and humanitarian crises, mass migration, and environmental degradation. The agreements cannot be imposed on states, NGOs, and private donors, but they do represent an ordered system, even if it works according to what Bull (1977) calls anarchic principles, because it depends on voluntary but binding agreements and mutual benefits rather than centralized enforcement. This raises complex questions about the effectiveness of aid, and different kinds of aid relationships, especially in the least developed countries (LDCs), where their ability and willingness to implement agreements may be low.

Aid has made important contributions to global governance, but its practices, motivations, and achievements are heavily contested. While its supporters argue that aid increases the welfare of rich and poor countries by stabilizing the open global order, its critics claim that the system is driven by selfish national interest and perverse incentives, creating considerable waste and bad performance (Moyo 2009; Easterly 2006; Bauer 1972; Engberg-Pedersen 1996; Ferguson 1996; Bond and Manyaya 2002). Both views rest on credible evidence, which will be briefly reviewed in the following sections.

The article first outlines the historical development of the aid system. It then presents the policy

challenges faced by donors and the system itself. Next, the strategies of Political Economy Analysis (PEA) and New Public Management (NPM) to improve aid effectiveness are presented and critically reviewed. Finally, the future role of EU-Africa cooperation is briefly discussed.

THE HISTORY OF AID RELATIONSHIPS

Changes in the global system, the political climate, and crises have produced significant changes in the power relations and political strategies that govern the international aid system.

Colonial powers began aid programs in the 1920s and 1930s to strengthen economic relations with their colonies, where they used aid to build the infrastructure needed to export raw materials and their own manufactured goods (Brett 1973). The modern aid system was created in the 1940s by the US, the IMF, and the World Bank to deal with post-war and then post-colonial reconstruction; it was transformed through Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the 1970s and 1980s, which promoted the shift from state- to market-led development (Bauer 1972; World Bank 1981; Little 1982; Lal 1984). This induced fundamental structural and political consequences for LDCs and post-communist states since SAPs forced them to cut deficits, devalue currencies, privatize state-owned enterprises, and reduce state controls over domestic and international markets. It produced radical changes in the allocation of wealth and power that benefited strong firms and states, but were resisted by threatened groups, evaded by rent-seeking regimes, and imposed excessive demands on weaker states that lacked the capacities needed to implement them. Democratic reforms were included in SAPs in order to improve accountability by replacing weak regimes, and/or to strengthen the ability of excluded groups to influence their behavior, strengthening the “third democratic wave” that took place in the 1980s and 1990s (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Huntington 1991). This was accompanied by a critique of austerity-oriented SAPs and a shift to Poverty Reduction Programs (PRPs) that still focused on market-based policies, but also recognized the need to strengthen state capacity and invest in pro-poor services, small-scale enterprises, and micro-credit systems (Hickey, 2012).

In the 21st century, the focus shifted to global agreements turning democracy and poverty reduction into a binding obligation. This resulted in a series of high-level agreements, which were negotiated and led to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in

¹ This article is a shortened version of Brett, E. A. (2016), “Explaining Aid (In)Effectiveness: The Political Economy of Aid Relationships,” LSE International Development Working Paper, 16–176, 1–19.

2000, the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2016.

These agreements represent a serious attempt to avert the tensions generated by earlier aid policies, but they ignore many serious obstacles that are caused by deeper and more persistent problems – conflicts over limited resources, growing poverty, exclusion, and inequality in fragile states that cannot compete effectively in increasingly open world markets, resistance from deep-rooted political and economic elites, the refusal of rich countries and individuals to forego unsustainable consumption levels, and the reluctance of poor countries to avoid increasing emissions to catch up. These problems will undoubtedly be greatly intensified in unpredictable ways by the economic dislocation caused by ongoing attempts to control the Covid-19 pandemic (Carboni and Casola 2020).

At the same time, the aid industry has become more complex and fragmented. New public donors such as China and private donors like the Gates Foundation, international and local NGOs, and private companies have gained influence.

THE COMPLEXITY AND CHALLENGES OF AID RELATIONSHIPS

Aid may involve mutual interests and cooperation, but it can also involve serious tensions, especially in LDCs where governments have limited resources, represent opposing groups, and operate in a context of intense poverty, insecurity, and contested power relationships.

In aid-dependent countries, aid makes a significant contribution to the budget and thus generates intense competition between different parties, such as government, civic organizations, etc. Donors play a key role as they can give or withhold support. However, their control is always incomplete because non-compliant rulers and their supporters have sovereign rights and can therefore evade unacceptable demands. Donors are often willing to fund under-performing programs in order to spend their budgets; they may disapprove of repressive regimes, but they cannot impose their decisions on them, and are obliged to avoid partisan political interventions that challenge their political authority or strengthen opposition parties and movements.

However, since their decisions play a key role in maintaining or undermining weak states and their leaders, their interventions have unavoidable political and policy consequences. The aid system is therefore based on asymmetric power relationships, disputed sovereignties, and competing, often contradictory objectives. Aid relations depend not only on the interests and capacities of the individual partners, but also on the tensions that arise in the negotiation and implementation of agreements between partners. They are

governed by weakly enforced rules and divergent goals that produce contingent outcomes that depend on the bargaining power of each side. Thus, while donors try to promote programs that are consistent with global agreements, their own resources, and the interests of their supporters, the success of those programs depends on whether they are compatible with the interests of local governments and on their ability or inability to resist unacceptable demands.

Recognizing these tensions provides us with a realistic approach to the complex and contentious processes of negotiating mutually beneficial agreements and an appropriate regulatory framework. It also raises difficult questions about the role and effectiveness of aid conditionality, and the current commitment to local leadership and political ownership embedded in the Paris Agreement and SDGs.

A realistic approach shows that aid relationships do not depend on aid per se, but on the nature of the interests that motivate the behavior of the governments and social movements on both sides. Donors should learn from the failures and successes of the past, recognize the need to challenge the authority of repressive elites, and recognize the limits of the neoliberal assumption that free markets, democratic elections, and “local ownership” will produce pro-poor solutions.

The ability of weak states to evade formal conditionality in the 1990s led donors to shift support to stronger states with “good policies” (Collier and Dollar 2002, 1476; Ritzan et al. 2000), marginalizing the poorest people in the poorest countries. Despite the exclusion of formal conditionality in current aid agreements, donor judgements about the ability of any state to respond to their demands represent a powerful form of implicit conditionality and influence the scale and terms of their support. Thus, aid negotiations are relatively collegial in successful states like Ghana and Uganda, but heavily contested in fragmented states like Nigeria, Pakistan, and Nicaragua, where regimes are not committed to poverty alleviation and political and economic settlements are characterized by disruptive class, ethnic, or sectarian conflicts. The donors’ ability to sustain viable programs in fragile states like Afghanistan, Somalia, and the DRC, which can no longer “exercise effective power within their own territories” (Clapham 1996, 21) is even more problematic.

Explanations for Success or Failure

Credible explanations for success or failure depend on the ability to identify the political and economic tensions that govern interactions between donors and recipients at local, national, and global levels as both donors and recipients attempt to reconcile their often contradictory goals and policy paradigms, especially in fragile and fragmented states. This requires a holistic and interdisciplinary approach, which has

produced excellent research on the national variables that influence the behavior of either donor or recipient governments (Gulrajani 2014; Brown 2013; Copestake and Williams 2013) but far less emphasis on the contradictory processes generated by the interactions between donors and recipients in different contexts and periods.

The tensions within aid relationships and resulting crises have led donor countries to address, rather than evade, the problem of bad governance and bad policies, and have confronted them with two key challenges: to persuade reluctant rulers to respond to democratic demands and implement pro-poor policies; and to strengthen the organizational systems required to do so. They have turned to Political Economic Analysis (PEA) to help them understand and respond to the first, and to New Public Management (NPM) to address the second challenge. Both attempts will be explored in more detail in the following section.

ATTEMPTS TO INCREASE AID EFFECTIVENESS

Political Economic Analysis (PEA)

The critical role of political variables in aid effectiveness is now widely recognized. Donors are aware of their role within recipient countries and have created a body of interdisciplinary policy theory referred to as PEA.¹ It should “encourage donors to think not only about what to support, but also about how to provide support,” (DFID 2009) taking political feasibility into account.

Several studies have reviewed the impact of PEA on aid policies. According to Unsworth (2009) it has improved “the scope and quality of internal debate among donor staff” by increasing the awareness of political systems and their impact on development. However, most studies emphasize the limited nature of its impact, especially in weak states, as the fragile structures and contradictory norms, incentives, and political constraints impose serious constraints on applying PEA. Unsworth (2009, 884) also points out that it is “influencing specific aspects of donor activity, [but] it is not prompting a more fundamental reappraisal of the implicit model of how development happens.”

Nevertheless, PEA provides the policy community with critical insights into the role of political variables in policy reform, and the limitations of formal conditionality in obliging weak states to adopt pro-poor programs. PEA recognizes that aid effectiveness indeed depends “primarily on efforts at the country level” and on the need for donors to “focus on facilitating these efforts, not on trying to replace them”

¹ “Political economy analysis is concerned with the interaction of political and economic processes in a society: the distribution of power and wealth between different groups and individuals, and the processes that create, sustain, and transform these relationships over time” (DFID, 2009).

(Booth 2011: 3), and provides us with the best informed analysis yet available of the challenges involved in combining “local ownership” with pro-poor policies.

The emerging consensus calls for interventions that work with local needs, capacities, and interests (Levy 2014). It tries to ensure that “functioning (or performance levels), achieved via whatever means enjoys political legitimacy and cultural resonance” (Pritchett et al. 2010). It seeks to replace governance reform by a “theory of change”², where micro-level initiatives provide a platform for the emergence of “islands of effectiveness” within a broader sea of dysfunction – securing some gains in the short term, and serving as a platform for cumulative gains over the longer run in both governance and poverty reduction (Levy 2014). However, PEA underestimates the need to transform the authoritarian institutions that enable their rulers and supporters to suppress the local movements.

Theorists argue that liberal democratic states are a necessary precondition for progressive cooperative solutions (for an extended analysis see Brett 2009). However, donors cannot rely on conditionality or moral exhortation to strengthen the ability of excluded elites and the poor to force repressive regimes to acknowledge their right to “binding consultation” (Tilly 2007) or invest directly in organizations involved in partisan politics. *However, donors can help them to develop the consciousness and organizational capacities needed to do so.*

The PEA literature acknowledges this need, but could do more to strengthen civil society and the state by investing in the organizational capacity of business and labor organizations, civic associations, media and advocacy groups, and tertiary education, which has been neglected, thus weakening the society’s leadership and organizational capacity that is an essential prerequisite for long-term democratic development (Brett 2017). This always involves an implicit threat to their political neutrality, so donor states need to find ways to do this without involving themselves directly in partisan politics – one good example being the role of the German political foundations like the Konrad Adenauer and Friedrich Ebert Foundations.

New Public Management (NPM)

The aid literature has concentrated on the macro-level relationships between donors and their local counterparts, rather than the micro-level “agency” problems involved in reforming the organizational systems that determine the terms that donors impose on the implementing agencies at the local level that carry out

² “A theory of change is a detailed description of the mechanisms through which a change is expected to occur in a particular situation. A theory of change identifies the goals, preconditions, requirements, assumptions, interventions, and indicators of a program, providing important insight into and guidance on intervention and impact evaluation design” (World Bank, 2020).

their projects and programs. These agency problems need to be addressed by reforming the incentive and authority systems that govern public and private service delivery systems.

Donors formerly focused exclusively on state-managed projects, but state failure and the shift to neoliberal theory has led them to fund private firms and NGOs that are directly accountable to donors or consumers. This can undermine state capacity, but adoption of a pluralistic strategy that tailors solutions to the differing needs and capacities of different kinds of community and society now dominates the policy agendas of all DCs as well as LDCs. It is informed by NPM theory, which identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the authority, incentive, and accountability systems that motivate governments, firms, and civic organizations and enables practitioners to make informed rather than ideological choices between them.

These capacities differ in strong, weak, or conflicted states, which enables donors to tailor their interventions to suit their specific needs by funding projects that increase the ability of recipients to use voice and/or exit to demand better services from their agencies (Hirschman 1970; Paul 1992). This approach gives practitioners a menu of organizational options, rather than an externally designed template, and one that incorporates the possibility of “hybrid” solutions that combine external and local practices in creative ways in order to take account of the weaknesses and conflicts that characterize fragile and fragmented states (Malinowski 1945/1961; Brett 2009; 2016). Thus, while NPM can be used to weaken the state and lead to regressive “public-private partnerships,” it can also be used not only to strengthen the ability of the state to regulate the whole system but also to redistribute resources and weaken the ability of repressive rulers to use old-style monopolistic state bureaucracies to extract rents and suppress opposition.

The ability of private firms and civics to function effectively also depends on the ability of progressive social and political movements, including donors themselves, both to strengthen their capacity to demand progressive reforms and to resist attempts by their opponents to block them. Thus donors need to develop long-term programs designed to support a long-term transition to “best-practice” institutions in weak states by combining PEA and NPM strategies by investing in the organizational systems that represent excluded classes and the awareness of the beneficiaries that receive them, as well as the actual agencies that supply pro-poor services. However, they should also accept the need for “second-best” hybrid solutions in the short run, which may not meet the standards set by the SDGs, but do incorporate and adapt local institutions and thus enable them to generate new and better solutions that local people can actually “own”.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF EU-AFRICA COOPERATION

This analysis shows how PEA and NPM could still be used to improve EU-Africa cooperation, but our ability to do so will be severely tested by the disruptive impact of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. Brexit will end the UK’s contributions to the EU aid budget and the country’s ability to influence EU aid policies, while the global lockdown has forced all states to control social behavior and rescue the private sector from its disruptive effects. This has generated the deepest economic recession in modern history, which has taken neoliberal policies off the agenda and imposed potentially unsustainable strains on already weakened state apparatuses across Africa.

Our ability to rescue the liberal global order from a potential catastrophe now depends on the ability of DCs to mobilize the resources needed to get their citizens back to work by refinancing the corporate and private sectors now threatened by bankruptcy, and to help African states to manage their fiscal crises and restore their productive capacity. This challenge is comparable to the post-war crisis that gave birth to the modern aid system, but is taking place when European aid budgets will be subjected to intense stress. We need a comparably radical response now that will demand major changes in all of the structures and economic policy regimes that have dominated the aid system since the structuralist crisis of the 1980s.

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