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The political fundamentals of aid

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Political developments such as the Brexit process or the rise of populist movements in Europe led to new-old questions related to aid, such as: why do countries give aid in the first place? Why and how are aid policies institutionalised? How is aid interlinked with the overall external action and foreign policy of countries? Is aid a tool for regional or global power or influence? Is it a path to global governance? This 're-politisation' of aid or of, at least, its narrative, calls for a new approach to aid studies.

Introduction

The European Commission's President-elect Ursula Von der Leyen's mission letter for the new EU Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, states that it is necessary to ensure that "the European model of development evolves in line with new global realities [...] and should contribute to **our wider political priorities**"¹. This is followed by more specific objectives (a comprehensive strategy for

Africa, a post-Cotonou agreement, working towards the achievement of the SDGs, the promotion of gender equality and the support of civil society).

This is only one example of how the political dimension of aid and the donors' interests are increasingly arising in political statements and public debates on development assistance, after decades characterized by an altruistic discourse on the part of donors (global poverty and other needs and the merits of partner countries) and a rather technical approach to development cooperation on the part of academics and analysts, who focused on topics more related to aid management (aid effectiveness, for instance).

This political shift is partly a consequence of political developments such as the Brexit process, the Trump Administration, the rise of populist movements in Europe, or the

¹ Von der Leyen, Ursula (2019), "Mission letter. Jutta Urpilainen. Commissioner-designate for International

Partnerships", European Commission, 10 September 2019, Brussels, p.4

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strengthening of emerging donors (particularly China). These events led to new-old questions related to aid, such as: why do countries give aid in the first place? Why and how are aid policies institutionalised? How is aid interlinked with the overall external action and foreign policy of countries? Is aid a tool for regional or global power or influence? Is it a path to global governance?

And, again, these new-old questions raise the need of a new angle in the study of aid; a vacuum we try to address in a recently published collective work on *Aid power and politics*.²

Why do countries give aid in the first place?

In the aforementioned collective work, we argue that answering this question requires re-framing aid in the logic of International Relations (IR) theories.

Malacalza reviews IR theories for the understanding of aid and groups them into six broad schools or categories, namely (i) realism and neo-realism; (ii) liberalism, neo-liberal institutionalism and the cosmopolitan perspective, (iii) constructivism, (iv) international political economy, (v) structuralism and critical theories, and (vi) foreign policy analysis.

Pauselli finds constructivism and realism to be very influential schools of thought in the empirical research on the motives of aid but concludes that the intersection between

development studies and IR theory is underdeveloped. Although aid literature has empirically explored the rationale behind aid geographical allocation (whether donors give aid out of selfish or altruistic motives), this analysis was disconnected from the theoretical grounds that could explain countries' behaviour as donors.

Why and how are aid policies institutionalised? How is aid interlinked with the overall external action and foreign policy of countries? Is aid a tool for regional or global power or influence?

The precise answers to those questions might vary from one country to another. For this reason, studying a number of big, small, old and new donors might prove useful. Both the political seeds that transform countries into donors and the eventual use of aid as a tool for exerting regional or global power or influence are assessed in the United States, the United Kingdom (UK), the Nordic countries, Japan, Spain, Hungary, Brazil, and the European Union.

These are all very different donors in terms of volume and shape. While de Cazotte describes US aid as the result of elites' consensus on aid, Wickstead presents the UK as an aid super-power. According to Stokke, it was mainly the global development agenda that drove aid in some of the best-reputed donor countries (Norway, Sweden and Denmark). Szabó, Szent-Iványi and Tétényi observe variations in the degree of influence in Government-NGO

² Olivié, Iliana and Aitor Pérez (eds.) (2019), *Aid power and politics*, London: Routledge

relations in Hungary. Santander depicts Brazil as a country aiming to mould global governance through aid. The authors of this brief interpret the history of Spain's involvement in international aid as that of the rise and fall of donor complying with external norms but with scarce national ownership of the aid policy. And, finally, the study of the EU reveals that different (and even contradictory) sets of motives of aid can actually co-exist.

Despite the many differences between these donors, domestic political seeds of aid are roughly the same everywhere: leadership – such as that of Clare Short, former Secretary of State for International Development, in the British political landscape of the late 1990s –, values – solidarity in Scandinavian countries, or liberal democracy in the USA –, compliance with international norms – as in Hungary and Spain –, or the weight of different domestic political actors and lobby groups (Administration, Government, NGOs, the business private sector...) and how these interact. We could conclude that different doses and combinations of those ingredients result in different modalities of aid (both in shape and in volume) that, in the end, become the basic political features of different development policies.

Is this a path to global governance?

As mentioned for the case of Brazil, it could be argued that, when used politically, aid can be a tool for donors' aiming at shaping global governance. This explains, according to Gulrajani and Swiss, the evolving nature of

“donorship” as a result of the increasing weight of non-Western donors. It is also the reason why health objectives have shifted as a consequence of the appearance of private stakeholders in the global health system.

This could also go the other way around: specific agendas, set in the aid universe, can shape the behaviour of countries or other agents.

These mechanics can be better understood with the study of specific agendas such as gender equality or democracy and good governance. In this latter case, as explained by Williams, this agenda, that became central in the aid regime in the late 1980s and 1990s, also showed difficulties in its implementation due to the confrontation of the international liberal consensus with domestic politics in recipient countries. As for gender equality, Engberg-Pedersen points out that, although sometimes reluctantly, donor organisations cannot avoid addressing gender equality in their development cooperation, but that they do so in substantially different ways. In the end, organisational origins, priorities and pressures, as well as normative environments, tend to bias and dilute global norms on gender equality.

Conclusion: aid politics in the age of nationalism and populism

Aid or, at least, its narrative, is increasingly politicised. In addition, this is happening in a period of emerging populist and/or nationalist movements or political parties in Europe. Maybe counter-intuitively, nationalism or populism

does not necessarily lead to decreasing aid budgets or a lower profile for international assistance, as explained by Gómez-Reino in this collective volume. The explanation lies in the fact that aid – eventually, re-shaped – can be a useful tool for fulfilling donors' interests.

In this context, the academia, think tanks and other experts need a better understanding of why, from a political perspective, countries

become donors and existing donors provide aid. More precisely, the classic altruist-selfish divide should be revisited in order to deeply understand the very wide range of objectives and interests that may guide a donor country. A narrow definition of interests (such as commercial interests) may hide other goals such as the capacity to shape global agendas or to gain reputation as a bilateral partner.

References

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