

Resenha

Ideas, Interests and Foreign Aid

A. Maurice VAN DER VEEN

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Foreign aid is an important part of international exchanges between countries, especially when it comes to economic relations. Assistance has been an important instrument of foreign policy in the contemporary world since, at least, the end of World War II. It is so present and important that some recipient nations are unable to make do without them. As for the donors, it would seem logical to think that aid is a valid method for acquiring influence internationally even if it represents an economic and financial burden at first glance. But there seems to be much more to it than that and such an explanation is not powerful enough to see through what lies beneath the waterline.

In a nutshell, why do countries give foreign aid? That is the question addressed by Van der Veen in his 2011 book entitled “Ideas, Interests and Foreign Aid”. According to him, even though a multitude of countries have independent foreign aid programs and even though they invest in such enterprises they do not seem to do that in the same way and not for the same reason. Here, framing is paramount for it channels legislators’ interests and, by doing so, are able to give form to a sort of “corporate interest” that is going to dictate all the peculiarities of countries’ aid programs, ranging from why to fund to who to fund, how and for how long.

The merit of the effort is enormous for a great many reasons. The first of them revolves around the selection of donor countries analyzed: Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Norway. Four European countries that have their own idiosyncrasies when it comes to foreign aid, but that have funded various different projects along the years. The second has to do with the time span chosen for analysis: from 1950 to 2000. While it presents a challenge concerning the amount of effort put into research, it is a praiseworthy effort for it enabled the analysis to transcend the Cold War period. The third reason, and here is where the book really starts to shine, is the use of frames in order to grasp the phenomenon of foreign aid in its fullest. This also enables the transposition of the insights herein generated to other cases as well. But there is more: the use of framing is not something widely carried out in the Social Sciences, generally speaking, being even less present in Political Science. Only recently is framing becoming more popular in these areas, with a growing amount of literature on the subject being published, even though the aggregate number

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is still not very large. In International Relations, however, framing is even less popular, being present in only a small fraction of the literature. This makes the book an “innovation” in the field, almost a “novelty”, so to speak. The frames were categorized based on policy-makers’ debates in the four countries. In this sense, frames can be viewed as “organizing boxes” which help to interpret and classify informational inputs as they come out. Interestingly enough, one is perfectly able of grasping very important elements such as “corporate preferences” and, according to them, identify specific policy choices and goals of countries in their condition of foreign aid suppliers.

The patterns of assistance have not remained the same throughout the period analyzed. This can be credited to structural and conjunctural changes, both endogenous and exogenous to these four countries and this is aptly captured by the frames most representative of the “corporate interests” of states at a given time and place. Since themes debated by policy-makers change as time progresses, it is only natural that frames be also substituted by others frames, more representative of a given situation specifically located at set time and a set place.

All of this does not mean that the book has not come without flaws. The frames are not treated as “choosers” of explaining variables and, thus, there is completely no causal value in them aprioristically. So, their role can only become “real” when an explaining variable is already present. This makes for a certain amount of “ad hocness” of the analyses. Another question that begs a more thorough answer is how these explaining variables are generated and become active so that they can become a stepping-stone for the formation of one of the seven frames theorized. However, these are minor questions that do not completely undermine the effort and do not underscore its explanatory power.

As for the frames theorized, they are thus:

- security;
- power/influence;
- wealth/economic self-interest;
- enlightened self-interest;
- reputation/self-affirmation;
- obligation/duty;
- humanitarianism.

Van der Veen also identified the goals for aid correspondent to each frame. The security frame has to do with increasing the donor country’s own physical security; the power/influence frame has to do with increasing the donor country’s own power internationally through increasing its leverage vis-à-vis others, winning allies and prestige; the wealth/economic self-interest frame connects with ameliorating one’s own economic position, both by augmenting one’s own presence on the economies targeted for aid and helping one’s own export sectors; the enlightened self-interest frame revolves around the supplying of global common goods such as peace, stability and others; the reputation/self-affirmation frame is intended at creating a certain “image” in international relations and also improving one’s own reputation internationally; the obligation/

duty frame has to do with coping with certain feelings of historical obligation towards other countries and regions (more common in former colonial powers but can be present in other countries as well); the humanitarianism frame relates to a perceived need of contributing to the well-being of poor societies worldwide. The stronger frame at give time and place can generally be held accountable for a substantial part of foreign aid programs' goals. This, however, does not mean that different frames cannot be concomitantly present, what, in fact, was observed empirically throughout the cases and time period analyzed.

The book is a good and timely contribution to the debate and presents many insights that might be useful to scholars researching foreign aid and themes related. This is even truer given the fact that foreign assistance is an interdisciplinary issue. All in all, Van der Veen's book might interest scholars in fields such as International Relations, Political Science, Sociology and/or Economics.

Key-words: Foreign Aid. Frames. International Relations. Interests. Preferences.

Palavras-chave: Ajuda Externa. Frames. Relações Internacionais. Interesses. Preferências.

