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When ‘unintended effects’ reveal hidden intentions: Implications of ‘mutual benefit’ discourses for evaluating development cooperation

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ABSTRACT

This article’s starting point is that the dichotomy between intended and unintended effects is linked to official policy discourse on the overall purpose and objectives of development cooperation. It describes and discusses recent policy trends that move away from emphasizing developing country benefits toward the pursuit of ‘mutual benefit’ as the key motivating factor and aim for development cooperation as an area of public policy. A mix of motivations has always driven development cooperation, yet the current policy trend differs in that such motivations are made explicit. As a consequence, recent policies suggest that these different interests represent ‘win-wins’ rather than trade-offs and conceptualize a common development agenda for the donor and recipient countries. Given that political discourse promotes and prepares legal and accountability systems, public scrutiny and independent evaluation are a few steps behind and largely restricted to analyzing benefits for developing countries. The article argues that articulating all goals of development cooperation can facilitate evaluation practice in this changed setting, as effects considered to be ‘unintended’ from the perspective of promoting development goals may, in fact, be intentional or anticipated from a mutual benefit perspective.

1. Introduction

In 1996, the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) adopted a strategy titled ‘Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Co-operation’, which presented forward-looking reflections based on half a century of development cooperation. It acknowledged the OECD states’ “strong moral imperative to respond to the extreme poverty and human suffering” but equally recognized their own “strong self-interest in fostering increased prosperity in the developing countries”. By emphasizing that “people are made less secure by the poverty and misery that exist in the world”, the OECD conveyed a message that development cooperation was as much about ‘us’ as about ‘them’ (OECD, 1996, p. 1). The OECD’s strategy is not famous for the words just quoted, which most would argue reflect conventional wisdom. It is remembered instead for the International Development Goals it proposed that evolved into the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), an influential global development framework replaced in 2015 by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Whereas the MDGs made a binary distinction between those countries that had already reached the end-stage of development and still ‘developing’ countries in need of their support, the 2030 Agenda

presents a universal agenda in which sustainable development hinges on the successful tackling of both common and collective challenges (Haddad, 2013; WBGU, 2016)

The new agenda goes beyond the role of development cooperation alone, covers all relevant areas of public policy and requires a strong role for actors beyond the state. It thus presents adjustment challenges to official development cooperation practice, which, particularly during the last decade, prioritized reforms to ensure optimal effectiveness with regard to producing results for its intended developing country ‘beneficiaries’. Some OECD members have gone further than others in presenting aid motives in more self-interested terms, irrespective of their situation in terms of increasing or decreasing Official Development Assistance (ODA) budgets. A clear illustration is the United States, which has long advanced a rather explicit position that views development policy as “a tool for fighting poverty, enhancing bilateral relationships, and/or protecting U.S. security and commercial interests” (The Law Library of Congress, 2016, p. 3), making the mixed objectives of the policy instrument transparent. Research on aid effectiveness has, in contrast, primarily focused on assessing the influence of aid flows on poverty reduction or economic growth in recipient countries (Lundsgaarde, 2013).¹ Observations in the aid effectiveness literature

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¹ Although policy debates on global development acknowledge broadening patterns of cooperation and have suggested new labels to accommodate key actors, this article uses the established terms ‘donor’ and ‘recipient’ for reasons of convenience and to make the connection to earlier discussions.

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consider other types of effects to be ‘unintended’, while ‘aid fatigue’ debates among electorates have construed evidence of low impact on poverty reduction as a sign that aid is failing. The dichotomy between intended and unintended effects is linked to official policy discourses and laws identifying poverty reduction as the objective of development cooperation, as well as to the ODA statistical system that requires eligible expenditure to pursue economic development and social welfare of developing countries as a main objective. Both academic research and independent evaluation take these official policies and accounting approaches as a starting point for analyzing development policies and operations.

This article discusses one explanation for why unintended effects occur, namely that effects are not fully assessed in relation to the true intentions of development cooperation investments, due to a misrepresentation of development policy as pursuing a single dominant aim. Varied aims and purposes are referenced in overall development policies but not reflected in operational documents at program and activity levels or in accountability frameworks. Some development cooperation effects that are not directly traceable to the dominant aim may therefore be mischaracterized as unintended. We argue that these effects can instead be termed ‘undisclosed intended effects’ of development cooperation. They are hidden in that they are hinted at in overall strategies yet are not articulated and operationalized in planning documents. Limitations in the description of objectives may in turn contribute to negative appraisals of the value of these investments and contribute to distorting accountability relations. The article uses the increasing emphasis on ‘mutual benefit’ in the development discourse of both OECD and non-OECD donors as a starting point to consider how to foster greater transparency about development cooperation intentions.

The article outlines recent trends in international development policy and compares how four different actors (Denmark, the European Union, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom) define and operationalize the objective of ‘mutual benefit’. In terms of its methodology, the paper is based on a review of literature on development cooperation and evaluation as well as relevant policy documents, while being complemented by direct observations of the authors during debates on development policy in their capacity as think-tank researchers. Examples discussed include recent European Commission policy proposals on more closely linking development cooperation to migration policy objectives, including the introduction of conditionality relating to readmission of migrants by partner countries, as well as the United Kingdom’s 2015 development policy reforms requiring ODA expenditure to directly meet UK taxpayer interests. The article subsequently proposes a way forward in accommodating diverse motives in development evaluation by outlining the prospect of composite assessments of results that capture intended results related both to cooperation providers and their intended developing country beneficiaries. The concept of ‘undisclosed intended effects’ provides an entry point for addressing how to evaluate development cooperation in response to the objective to promote mutual benefits among cooperation providers and developing countries. Based on this analysis, the article explores implications for development studies and independent evaluation.

2. Mutual benefits and unintended effects

The term ‘mutual benefit’, or alternatively ‘mutual interest’, originates from the policy domain and has been used in various contexts by diverse stakeholders. A recent OECD publication argues that the term originates from a UN conference on South–South Cooperation (SSC), noting that the concept “is linked to solidarity and equality among countries and implies that international co-operation arrangements have win–win outcomes benefitting all partners involved” (OECD, 2016a, p. 25). Southern think tanks use the concept to distinguish SSC from North–South cooperation, which they argue is a cooperation approach “where one partner is ‘giving’ and the other ‘receiving’ (NEST,

2015, p. 21). The distinction presented between South–South Cooperation and North–South Cooperation is not based on a structured comparison between the motives of the two categories of cooperation providers, however. In reality, the partnership orientation of OECD–DAC donor policy, as reflected in the Paris Declaration, similarly reflects an acceptance of mutual interests in the development cooperation relationship (Tortora, 2011). As Grimm (2014) suggests in relation to Chinese development cooperation in Africa, the concept of mutual benefit in South–South cooperation may also paper over the real balance of cooperation benefits, pointing out that the words ‘mutual’ and ‘equal’ are not interchangeable. Nevertheless, the mutual benefit discourse of non-OECD donors may provide an explicit statement of the commercial and geopolitical rationale for providing assistance to certain countries (Sato, Shiga, Kobayashi, & Kondoh, 2011), contributing to a transparency of aid motives from which OECD donors have shied away. In part, due to the rise of important cooperation providers articulating their explicit interests, the willingness of OECD–DAC donors to frame their motives in similar terms has increased (Fejerskov, Lundsgaarde, & Cold-Ravnkilde, 2017).

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development proposes a universal agenda that presents sustainable development as a shared mission as well as a mutual interest. This contrasts with the previous MDG-based frameworks, which continued a long-standing approach to presenting a binary view of the world consisting of a group of ‘developed countries’ that agreed to assist a group of ‘developing countries’ in their efforts to achieve the same end-state.

While a new ‘universal’ development agenda may legitimize donors to include mutual benefit considerations in their development policies, it is not the only factor influencing this. References to mutual benefits may also be linked to efforts to consolidate taxpayer’s support to a budget and area of public policy that supports foreign beneficiaries. In other words, emphasis on mutual benefit responds to perceived ‘What’s in it for us?’ questions among taxpayers. Governments have typically answered that question in two ways: first, by means of scaremongering through presenting development cooperation as a means to fight terror or prevent migration flows (see Easterly, 2016); second, governments have argued that development cooperation will generate economic returns in donor countries and therefore directly serves national interests (see Hulme, 2016). The latter is not new; e.g., discussions in the Netherlands have often argued that stable and developing countries lead to increased trading opportunities (see Lieshout, van Went, & Kremer, 2010).

This discussion points to a spectrum of motivations or interests that can influence development cooperation objectives, which, as Hulme (2016, p. 11) puts it, range “from the highly minded – ‘It’s our moral duty’ – to the venal – ‘We can look good and make a fast buck out of this’”. At one end of the spectrum, aid might, in theory, be considered entirely self-interested if its purpose is to appeal to a domestic audience or a set of concrete donor-defined interests. One example is the packaging of aid-financed projects as part of wider deals in the donor’s interest, such as the notorious case of the Pergau Dam in Malaysia that was financed by the UK’s foreign aid budget as a part of an arms trade deal (see Lankester, 2013).²

Progressing along the spectrum, aid may be provided to address a mixture of donor and recipient motives. A variety of development cooperation practices fit within this category. The mixed motives driving aid practices can explain tied aid, where donors may provide aid to address social and economic development needs of developing countries while reducing the overall value of the transfer by ensuring that donor suppliers capture a component of the aid provided (Hall, 2011). Another example can be found in discussions on the link between security and development, with recent policy proposals stating that

² Even this illustration might provide an example of aid for mutual benefit, as it points to an exchange relationship and a Malaysian interest in the hydropower project.

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