



THE LEGITIMACY OF AID, PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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Introduction

The dominant narrative of ‘aid’ in the modern era (at least since 1945, if not before) is inextricably entwined with a concept of global order that can no longer be taken for granted. Legitimised by the UN Charter with its commitment (Article 1.3) *“To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character”*, an international architecture has emerged comprising multilateral and bilateral donor agencies, complemented by a burgeoning civil society sector of local, national, and international NGOs. Leaders at successive international conferences have committed to address issues of global poverty and injustice, and the flow of aid has become normalised, even if it remains somewhat irregular.

But this project has relied on the dominant economic and political power of the United States, coupled with the ending of colonial empires and the continuing obligations felt by the former (Western) colonial powers to provide ‘aid’ to their newly independent former colonies. During the Cold War, and increasingly today, it has been challenged by great power competition and to an extent by differing ideologies. While the West has marched to the rhythm of liberal humanitarianism, in other parts of the forest some have followed a different drumbeat. The emerging global powers are comfortable with a more businesslike approach to ‘aid’, without what they would regard as some of the pretensions of professed altruism. In addition, – whether it is the provision of emergency relief or efforts to foster longer-term development – ‘aid’ is seen by many in developing countries and elsewhere as a post-colonial, top-down, project: insensitive to local needs and increasingly inappropriate. Some would argue that ‘aid’ can never be anything other than imperial.

What, then, is the legitimacy of ‘aid’ as we understand it, and what future does/should it have? Is the very notion of ‘official development assistance’ outmoded, and will the fundraising appeals of the UN and NGOs become increasingly irrelevant? If, on the other hand, the notion of global solidarity is still important, how will it be expressed in future years: does altruism still have a part to play, or will a giant global marketplace of competing ideologies and inducements become the norm? One thing is clear: those who continue to believe in the importance of ‘aid’, and in the values that lie behind it, can no longer assume – if indeed they ever could – that these are universally accepted. It is not just a question of how ‘aid’ is done, but whether the very concept still has legitimacy in its own right.

Issues

The new opportunities of the digital age fundamentally change the operation of the global economy. Whether it is sophisticated algorithms in London and New York steering the movement of stock markets, or farmers in rural Kenya checking the local market value of their produce on their smartphones, money works in different ways now, its wonders to perform. In 2024, the long-running

debate about cash transfers to those in need rather than the provision of goods seems rather academic. In addition, the importance of 'aid' in overall global financial flows has perhaps always been exaggerated by those with a vested interest in its continuation. The provision of 'aid' should clearly be seen in the context of other mechanisms, such as remittances from the diaspora, private sector investment, the availability of credit. 'Trade, not aid' has long been a cry from campaigning NGOs, and the need for a more level playing field that does not disempower the smaller players is arguably as important as increased financial flows from richer to poorer. The 'spirit of the age' calls for an approach that is both multi-directional and multicultural.

A further issue concerns what one might call 'the terms of aid'. The language of aid 'partnership', which trips so easily off the tongue, often blurs the way in which the relationship between 'donor' and 'recipient' can be perceived as fundamentally asymmetric and disempowering. The prevailing and increasingly insistent calls for 'localisation' of aid reflect this reality, but the obstacles to doing it well, caused not least by concerns about accountability from within donor countries where the aid budget is often under attack, remain considerable. And yet, to be legitimate, aid – as we in the West understand it - must serve the interests of the people in whose name it is given, rather than being seen as another instrument of foreign policy that fundamentally serves the interest of the giver. Furthermore, in situations of state breakdown or failure – where needs are often most acute – aid may unintentionally confer legitimacy on those who are part of the problem: corrupt governments, or recalcitrant warlords. (How should aid be brought to Sudan in its present, dire, crisis?) 'Localisation' may be obvious as a concept, but it is not unproblematic in practice.

Nor can one ignore the issue of legitimacy in the eyes of those, whether taxpayers or charity supporters, whose contributions make aid possible in the first place. This is partly a question of performance (do aid agencies deliver on their promises, and how honest and realistic have they been in the past about their effectiveness – have they peddled a dangerously over-optimistic narrative of 'aid can fix everything' to keep the funds coming in?) It also reflects the reality of a world where inequalities are growing not just between rich and poor countries, but also within both: poverty, clearly, begins at home. And for those 'on the receiving end' of aid, especially from INGOs who claim the moral high ground, the challenge to their present legitimacy is partly a product of the historical context which has led to their present position. If aid is seen as a way of paying off an imperial debt incurred in the past it weakens the legitimacy of the aid agency (this dimension may become more prominent if the slavery reparations debate flares up again as now seems likely). Aid also risks being caught in the crossfire of the increasingly active conflict between Western powers who strive to maintain a 'rules-based international system', and those who are hostile to the West and its universalist principles and neoliberal models. For the latter, attacking aid is part of a much bigger challenge to a post WWII international system they believe to be weighted against them — Putin and Russia most obviously, but also China, India, Turkey, among others. Some of these powers do not distinguish military aid from humanitarian or development aid, but see them all as instruments of foreign policy and diplomacy. What place can the DAC rules hope to occupy in this context; how hard should they be defended, and is there any prospect of achieving international consensus about their importance? From a more benign perspective, can one really object to those who would rather speak of 'investment' in developing economies, rather than of 'aid' to them? Perhaps a good model would be one where 'aid' is seen as playing a small but important role in lubricating the wheels of the global economy so that it works better for the poorest and most disadvantaged: demonstrating what works and what doesn't, so that others will come in to invest in its wake. Maybe 'small' can become 'beautiful' again.

Conclusion

We start from the premise that aid, and doing it well, still matters. But without an informed debate about the issues sketched out above, the legitimacy of aid is likely increasingly to be challenged. Continuing to assert the moral imperative in the face of the cynical and self-interested foreign policy approaches of some is important, but it is not enough. Maintaining support for aid in traditional donor and receiving countries, as well as growing it among those outside the traditional western aid-giving community, is a considerable challenge. But it cannot be ducked.

Professor Sir Mike Aaronson
Professor Andrew Thompson