



Barriers to Political Analysis in Aid Bureaucracies: From Principle to Practice in DFID and the World Bank

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Summary. — Politics has become a central concern in development discourse, and yet the use of political analysis as a means for greater aid effectiveness remains limited and contested within development agencies. This article uses qualitative data from two governance “leaders” – the United Kingdom Department for International Development and the World Bank – to analyze the administrative hurdles facing the institutionalization of political analysis in aid bureaucracies. We find that programing, management, and training practices across headquarters and country offices remain largely untouched by a political analysis agenda which suffers from its identification with a small cross-national network of governance professionals.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign aid agencies have begun to confront the dilemmas of how politics shapes development interventions and outcomes. While in academia the politics of aid and development is a mature research agenda (Booth, 2011, 2012; Bräutigam & Knack, 2004; Callaghy & Ravenhill, 1993; Hickey, 2013; Hudson & Leftwich, 2014; Hyden, 2008; Nelson, 1996; Van de Walle, 2001; Wright & Winters, 2010), in practitioner circles the incorporation of political goals and methods into policy practice is at best an “almost revolution” (Carothers & Gramont, 2013). Governance, corruption, and institutions have entered the rhetoric and – to some extent – strategies of major multilateral and bilateral agencies (e.g., DFID, 2009a; UNDP, 2002; World Bank, 2012), but the question remains whether a change in discourse can have an actual impact on operations. Over the last 15 years various forms of political or political-economy analysis (PEA)¹ have been developed across OECD donors with the objective of supplying an analytical framework for aid effectiveness (Dahl-Østergaard, Unsworth, Robinson, & Jensen, 2005; OECD, 2009). From a PEA perspective, the vanquishing of pro-developmental political forces by anti-developmental ones is among the chief reasons for the recurrent failure of aid-sponsored reform initiatives, a diagnosis that forces donors to think politically and perhaps even act politically (Rocha Menocal, 2014; Routley & Hulme, 2013; Yanguas, 2012). But can aid bureaucracies actually incorporate the principles of political analysis into their practice? Are the messy demands of political analysis reconcilable with underlying disbursement incentives and entrenched professional cultures? Does the introduction of more politically-smart methods have lasting repercussions beyond the very people who advocate them?

In this article we focus on two aid organizations – the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID) and the World Bank – which are widely regarded by the political-economy analysis community as first-movers or leaders, intellectually as well as operationally. Both these donors have spent the better part of the last decade grappling with the challenges of governance and trying to process – in fits and starts, with more or less success – what its lessons

are for day-to-day development practice. There is no agreed upon benchmark for such “success”; indeed, for many PEA proponents, simply getting nongovernance specialists to talk about politics is a triumph in itself. However, in terms of organizational sociology we have to conceptualize success as institutionalization, with such indicators as the introduction of new mandatory procedures, the internalization of new ideas by organizational management, or the (re)design of professional competence frameworks. To that end, we delve into the organizational dynamics of each donor, using internal documentation and interview data on their aid operations across headquarters and three country offices.² As PEA leaders, both DFID and the World Bank are “most likely cases” for new ideas about political analysis influencing practice, while retaining the distinctiveness of bilateral and multilateral aid contexts. Their experiences cannot be generalized to every single aid donor in the world, but ongoing exchanges, cross-pollination, and isomorphism in the organizational field of development assistance mean that more donors are likely to follow where DFID and the World Bank tread; moreover, the emerging epistemic community proposing PEA is likely to encounter similar obstacles and challenges elsewhere as they do in these two organizations, even heightened. Therefore, while the evidence from these two cases is insufficient to establish a rigorous generalization, it can in fact supply rigorous pointers in terms of research and policy implications.

The practice of the World Bank and DFID headquarters and offices demonstrates that the principles of political analysis are far from institutionalized in their actual operations. Despite different political environments – multilateral and bilateral – and very different lending instruments and goals, the incorporation of PEA into both donors’ operations exhi-

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bits three similar patterns. First: whatever frameworks for political analysis have been produced internally have remained peripheral to core operational guidelines, leading to a practice of occasional, ad hoc, and nonmandatory analytical work superimposed on conventional planning, implementation, and evaluation models. Second: whatever informal systems for political engagement have been tried arose from the discretion of individual country and project management personnel, and thus remained idiosyncratic and personality-based products. Third: despite over a decade's worth of refinement and dissemination, PEA strategies and methodologies have been largely ignored outside the governance profession. Underlying these patterns of negligible impact on operational guidelines, over-reliance on personality, and a certain professional parochialism, is the deeper corporate incentive to disburse aid funds as quickly and efficiently as possible, for which political analysis is still seen as an obstacle. These comparative findings lead us to conclude that the task of getting aid bureaucracies to think politically for the ultimate goal of aid effectiveness has to be considered first as a contentious process of organizational change, one in which the powerful inertia of the aid business can severely curtail the aspirations of a small network of motivated analysts and practitioners.

2. POLITICAL ANALYSIS IN AID BUREAUCRACIES

A number of OECD donors have developed analytical frameworks for identifying and processing governance challenges. The labels and buzzwords vary: power analysis, corruption, and governance assessments, drivers of change, and so on (OECD, 2009). But the basic aim of all these forms of political or political-economy analysis (PEA) is to improve rates of project success through better diagnostics of reform challenges and operating environments. Its promise is one of aid effectiveness.

Much of the conversation about PEA has so far involved the very researchers and practitioners who proselytize it: a loose network of professionals spanning bilateral donors like the UK Department for International Development (DFID) or the Netherlands aid agency, multilaterals like the World Bank and UNDP, think tanks like the Overseas Development Institute, and private companies like Oxford Policy Management or The Policy Practice.³ Political-economy analysis remains an insider's game, the realm of governance advisers and consultants. Unsurprisingly, the dominant questions in the nascent PEA literature address the issues deemed most pressing by its foremost practitioners: what are the best frameworks, who should be involved in applying them, how can they identify solutions instead of just problems, and whether is it possible to think and speak politically in development contexts which often reward discretion over honesty (Routley & Hulme, 2013).

While debates so far have dealt with political analysis as a principle – discussing what its substance and form should be – perhaps the more fundamental question is one of practice, specifically whether it can be reconciled with the current context of development policy. Among its achievements, the political analysis community can count introducing a more nuanced understanding of institutions, a more open and realistic debate about the nature of power in development, and a more systematic approach to development policy analysis; however all these innovations have rarely been translated into actual change in aid practices, due to an overly macro-political and academic focus as much as to the inherent sensitivity of talking openly about political contention (Copestake &

Williams, 2014). The impact of political analyses varies at different levels, and even when they present clear practical implications they have to face strong intellectual barriers against the open integration of “politics” in development assistance debates and policies (Unsworth, 2009). Weak institutional memory and a reluctance to politicize donor–recipient relations may have curtailed the impacts of whatever successful PEAs have been conducted (Duncan & Williams, 2012). There are often tensions around public communications and unrealistic expectations about aid effectiveness, which clash with the intrinsic pragmatism and incrementalism of political analysis (Wild & Foresti, 2011). Lastly, the continued search for operational relevance in terms of “results” may have actually diluted the quality of analysis in a self-defeating transition from “process” to “product,” further compounding the challenge of translating policy into practice (Fisher & Marquette, 2014).

The process of data collection for this article revealed very clearly that so far it has been individuals – acting alone or as a network – who have been pushing for PEA. We are tempted to call these proponents an “emerging epistemic community”: a transnational coalition of policy-makers and experts (both academics and consultants) seeking to advance a new set of policy ideas through the combination of research findings and principled frames (Haas, 1992). However, the ultimate impact of PEA depends on the ability of this epistemic community to transform aid bureaucracies, for whom change on the scale demanded by governance analysis may be a great challenge – perhaps too great to handle. The fundamental question of political analysis – at this stage at least – is not so much whether its application can lead to better aid and thus improved development outcomes, but whether it can be institutionalized within aid organizations subject to institutional constraints and cultural inertia. And this requires “unpacking” the administrative constraints inherent to aid bureaucracies.

The study of donors as development organizations with their own technical cultures and operational quirks has flourished in recent years. To some extent this is due to the development of more reliable indicators for aid operations and practices at country and project level, covering such themes as transparency, selectivity, or compliance with “best practices” enshrined in the Paris Declaration (Easterly & Williamson, 2011; Ghosh & Kharas, 2011; Gulrajani, 2014; Kilby, 2011; Knack, Rogers, & Eubank, 2011). There has also been a renewed emphasis on assistance modalities, donor–recipient relations, and issues of co-ordination and harmonization (Swedlund, 2013; Winters & Martinez, 2015; Yanguas, 2012, 2014). And some researchers have delved into messy bureaucratic entrails – where only consultants used to tread – in order to better understand how donor priorities translate into actual practices (Lebovic, 2014; Sjöstedt, 2013; Vestergaard & Wade, 2013). We too are interested in analyzing donors' internal behavior, but with a focus on policy change: to that end we require a basic analytical framework for understanding how new ideas interact with existing bureaucratic structures.

Like most bureaucracies, donor agencies are usually slow to change, due to the weight of accumulated common knowledge and cognitive short-cuts informing how a development organization should work (e.g., Scott, 2008; Thompson, 1967; Zucker, 1987). There is a lot of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) in the organizational field of aid, with donors internally replicating “what works” or at least “seems to work” for their peers (Andrews, 2013). Even if donors tend to consider the political conditions of recipients

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