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The Politics of Development Aid: Implications for Pakistan

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to identify salient issues associated with poverty alleviation within an aid for development context. In particular, overt conditionalites like structural adjustment and the recently formulated Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers are considered to identify how they have influenced the shape of development interventions across many poor countries of the world. Thereafter, the paper brings a location and time specific perspective to the political imperatives of development aid, by considering the example of Pakistan, which has experienced an influx of aid, based on its post-September 11 geo-strategic value. Subsequently an attempt is made to unravel the vested interests underlying seemingly naturalized relations of donors using the example of a particularly important developing nation, where both the politics of aid as well as the multilateral mechanism for poverty alleviation are currently in use so as to draw lessons of relevance to other developing nations as well.

While the paper does not attempt to offer a new theory or approach to development aid, since many such theories already exist, it will make transparent hitherto opaque relations of power and therefore create further impetus for change and implementation of alternative development aid practices. The combination of conceptual, location and policy specific analysis helps articulate and coalesce otherwise disparate connections apparent in academic criticism, international networks and local civil society concerning the inadequacy of the prevailing aid paradigm to alleviate poverty.

Introduction

The nature of human development needs is rather basic. It implies universal access to primary health, education and employment facilities. Meeting nutritional and safety requirements of all people also seem like fairly straightforward tasks to achieve. Yet the attempts to address such needs are becoming a highly theorized and technical area of practice. The lacklustre results of development efforts are also visible for all to see. Yet in critiquing development in practice, one encounters the difficulty of reading too much into particular instances of programmatic failures. To articulate a more informed perspective, critics must grapple with the theoretical assumptions behind development programs and relate their arguments concerning particular programmatic approaches (and/or their inefficiencies) to the broader assumptions that inform and formulate development policies. I will be taking this latter approach while considering the issue of development aid. The term 'development aid' in the case of this paper will refer to multilateral, bilateral and private transnational transfers of financial and technical resources from developed to developing countries.

While it is true that the management of aid already receives enough attention, particularly by the donors, the imperatives which determine which countries are to qualify for aid and the manner in which this aid is delivered to them, often receive less scrutiny. Surely the politics of aid has an important effect on aid effectiveness as well, and merits more attention within the developing world also, including in Pakistan.

Historical Perspective on Development Aid

The use of international aid for development finds precedence in the 'infant colony subsidies' administered by Britain, Germany, France and the US before the turn of the last century (Bowen, 1998). However, it was not until well after World War II that the structures of the UN system, as well as those of bilateral donor programs, international financial institutions and regional development banks were formed. At this point in time, capital-intensive projects were the most popular mode of channeling development support to the newly independent countries of the so-called 'third world'. But by the early 1970s, the failure of economic growth to 'trickle down' to people at the bottom of the social and economic scale accentuated concern for alleviating poverty through a more comprehensive approach (Akira & Yasutami, 1999).

A 'basic human needs' criterion was thus articulated which emphasized universal access to basic social services and livelihood necessities. In 1976, the International Labour Organization endorsed this approach and bilateral donors also began acknowledging its validity. However, the aftermath of Organization for Petroleum Exporting Countries-induced oil shocks in the next decade exacerbated a mounting debt crisis of developing nations. Consequently, economic sustainability overshadowed the focus on basic human needs and demands for the New International Economic Order being propagated by a group of 77 developing nations (Akira & Yasutami, 1999). Instead, the structural adjustment approach formulated by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) - the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank - became a predominant prescription for enhancing savings and stimulating the investment and production needed for growth and subsequently for poverty reduction across much of the world (World Bank, 2000).

Around this time, Robert McNamara proposed a study on integration of common interests of industrial and developing countries into the global economic system. The findings of this study (known as the Brandt Report) were submitted to the Secretary General of the United Nations in 1980, which outlined a strategy for survival in an increasingly polarized world by highlighting the need to redistribute resources to the poor (Quilligan, 2002). However, even this report was severely criticized for offering solutions considered a part of the problem itself, given its keen interest in expanding markets and fields for investment as the means for ensuring greater equality (Hayter, 1987).

On the other hand, the UN has been consistently declaring 'decades of development' since the 1960s and has gradually brought some human development issues to the forefront. The UNICEF publication *Adjustment with a Human Face* for example, visibly highlighted outcomes of structural adjustment policies in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, and the failure of equity and long-term efficiency gains to be ushered in by freeing market forces (Cornia, 1988). Still it took over a decade for the IFIs to realize that macroeconomic stabilization processes may be required for growth, but that they are not sufficient for poverty reduction. Subsequently, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers were launched by the IFIs at their Annual Meeting in Washington in September 1999, which are intended to be the basis for all foreign aid to poor countries. Due to their immense international influence, the IFIs have also been encouraging all rich country donors to link their assistance to Poverty Reduction Strategies.

Both the IFIs maintain that this new approach marks a major shift in the way that global poverty is now being addressed, since borrowing countries are being encouraged to design their own development strategies, with an explicit focus on poverty reduction (UNDP, 2001). Yet in view of the aid dependency of developing countries, critics doubt the extent to which such programs can be truly government-owned (World Vision, 2001). They consider this new IFI approach as nothing more that an assimilative desire of turning the state into a better 'market manager' and the poor into better 'market players' without reconsidering the social and political foundations of the global market system, which perpetuates the inequality (Chossudousky, 1997).

Prevailing Notions Concerning Aid

The last two UN sponsored World Summits on Sustainable Development, held in 1995 in Copenhagen and in 2002 in Johannesburg, provide a good place to begin looking for what the current issues concerning use of development aid are. The most significant advance made at the Copenhagen summit was the articulation of a comprehensive set of parameters for defining poverty, and the realization that poverty was being aggravated by unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. This summit highlighted the need for time-bound commitments by nations with regard to poverty eradication (Waller & Lombard, 1995). Unfortunately, this attention was not translated into concrete action and this need for time-bound commitments was merely reaffirmed in 2002 at Johannesburg. The Johannesburg Summit did articulate targets and timetables to spur action on important environmental issues and stated a commitment to halve the proportion of people who lack access to clean water or proper sanitation by 2015. The Summit has instigated a new resolve of partnerships for development between governments, citizen groups and businesses, considering this the most feasible option to bring in supplementary resources and expertise (UNDP, 2002). However, the context of partnerships is not without peril (as I will later argue). Also, by not being able to obtain firm commitments concerning poverty eradication, both the WSSD conferences in effect failed in providing a long-term solution to secure resources needed to reach the poverty eradication goal.

The UN Conference on Finance for Development held in Monterrey in March 2002 was in fact the first time that the UN, the World Trade Organization and the IFIs gathered at a unified platform. This collective meeting also endorsed a commitment to halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of the world's people whose income is less than one dollar a day and the proportion of people who suffer from hunger, which had been earlier quoted as being one of the UN's Millennium Development Goals (UNDP, 2002).

As for the much-trumpeted proposal calling for developed nations to devote 0.7 per cent of their gross national product to development aid, it figured only as a goal in the Monterrey declaration, not a pledge. Throughout this conference, there was seen to be a continued emphasis on aid effectiveness over volume (Actionaid, 2002). More radical proposals for global governance, with new international organizations to regulate the environment and international taxes, were squarely ruled out in the attempt to obtain multilateral consensus (Development Initiatives, 2002).

The multilateral agencies' conviction that free trade and private investment hold the key to development remains prominent. Even the UNDP has begun laying emphasis on the need for the corporate sector to divert flows towards social sectors. In a recent paper delivered at the Oxford Analytica Conference, a senior UNDP administrator stated that the private sector has a real role to play in - and benefits to gain from - encouraging and supporting state efforts to create and preserve educated, healthy workforces and consumers, 'living in peaceful, crime free environments' (Mallock, 2002). Yet this assessment seems rather optimistic when juxtaposed with increasing claims by developing world activists that trade liberalization demonstrably undermines the livelihoods of small producers and vulnerable social groups, especially those of women who support a major part of the costs of such policies and barely have access to any of the ensuing benefits (Gideon, 2002).

A high profile publication by the World Bank entitled *Assessing Aid: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why* (World Bank, 1998) provides a consolidated perspective on donor aid policies and prescriptions. It states that development agencies must shift away from the focus on total disbursements and narrow evaluation of physical implementation of projects, towards more meaningful or 'high impact' development assistance for poverty alleviation. For doing so, it stresses sound management and cooperation.

Yet all this attention to the poverty issue has still not led to a definite shift in the underlying approach to addressing this problem. The Development Centre of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development also suggests similar process-oriented changes that would make development strategies less bureaucratic, more devolutionary and thus improve targeting of beneficiaries (Cox & Healy, 2000). But in the name of 'listening to the poor,' or 'being able to better reach them', increasing impositions are being made by donors that in effect are supporting the interests of governability rather than those of poverty reduction. Donors are thus admonished for wasting resources on the creation of self-fulfilling discourses and practices, when their funding could do so much more for those most in need (Townsend, Porter & Mawdsley, 2002).

Prevalent institutional trends do seem indicative of a rather stubborn desire for adopting 'band-aid' solutions to the festering problem of global poverty. Inefficient management practices are blamed for the dismal performance rather than flaws inherent in development strategies (Randel & German, 1999). Perhaps the problem lies not with the techniques of aid giving, or with the fact that individual practitioners don't apply it properly, but rather with the concept of development aid itself. Northern-dominated global institutions are being seen as consolidating a system of highly unequal relations between countries that is perpetuated by ever stringent conditionalities. According to the 'Reality of Aid' Group (a collaborative initiative between NGOs (non-government organizations) from the north and south which conducts independent reviews of poverty reduction and development assistance), such institutions not only advance the commercial, political and diplomatic interests of the North, but they often deepen poverty and inequality (Randel & German, 1998).

Aid proponents have made assumptions that nation states are able to influence and guide the development process in a way that benefits the poorest members. Yet having poverty alleviation as a national goal does not ensure that it will be implemented, nor will it exclude more grandiose ambitions that may even contradict this goal (Srinivasan, 1994). For example, recent reports in the press mention that plans to build the world's largest hydroelectric project on the Congo River are being discussed by African leaders, quite contrary to the pledges of bringing electricity to rural people using local wind and solar power projects. Big projects have a habit of going sour in Africa, often getting mired in corruption, and furthermore, power grids won't even reach the hundreds of millions of the rural poor (Pearce, 2002).

Moreover, the manner in which neo-liberal preconditions have become the prerequisite for initiating IFI development policy dialogue is not considered coincidental by all. Neo-liberalism is often described as an ongoing political project explicitly and implicitly concerned with normalizing and naturalizing conditions such as free trade, flexible labour, public-sector austerity, and low inflation. Neo-liberalism is certainly not an inevitable result of global economic circumstances but rather a strategic inculcation of an economic ideology from the more 'developed' to 'developing' countries, one that cedes government control over macroeconomic policies to the IFIs (Pearce, 2002).

Any negotiations between IFI and recipient countries are thus considered limited in scope, since neo-liberal assumptions implicit in conditionalities of IFI assistance, are not up for debate. This implicit understanding has largely influenced how development aid to poor countries should be used. Implicit restrictions of this sort can do no more than provide options like the Social Action Plans, which were enthusiastically promoted in many developing countries during the early nineties to help address the social impact of structural adjustment. Their main objective was to increase access of the poor - particularly women and children - to basic social services particularly in education and health. These Social Action Plans were guided by IFI support and in many cases those of other bilateral and multilateral donors, but executed by recipient governments themselves, with the help of Multi-Support Units created by the donor agencies. Although recognized for their potential to broadening collaboration for social development, there were several inherent flaws in the design of SAPs that hindered not only their implementation but also the perceived social outcomes (Khan, 1999). Besides the institutional inefficiencies that can best be understood in the light of individual project experiences, there became evident a generalized inability of governments to balance obligations to other IFI commitments and social development expenditures committed to these Plans. This is what happened in the case of Pakistan as well, which undertook the largest Social Action Program in the South Asian region, but here too this mitigating measure proved ineffective in protecting the poor as evident by the sharp increase in the incidence of poverty in the 1990s.

Politics in Aid

There is enough evidence on ground to corroborate the statement that development efforts in the Third World are often defined by the strategic interests of super powers and corrupt practices of politicians and government officials. Several governments in Latin America, Asia and Africa have evidently used IMF programs as a convenient excuse for more repression, for breaking up trade unions and for patronizing vested interests and filling their own pockets (George, 1988).

But poverty has now also assumed a new geopolitical significance due to increased concerns about risks posed by 'failed states', particularly due to the fear of terrorism. The media is now saturated by such views. The President of the United Nations General Assembly considers poverty the breeding ground for violence and despair (Miles, 2002). Even the head of the World Trade Organization in the wake of September 11 has dubbed poverty, in all its forms, as the greatest single threat to peace, security, democracy, human rights and the environment (ibid.).

Yet, it is paradoxical that as the aid regime gets stronger the range of choices available to recipient countries narrows (Bowen, 1998). Recipient countries have very few choices about conditions that have to be met for qualifying for foreign aid, and the poorest states, where structural adjustment may be the least feasible due to the unreliability of administrative structures, are unable to compete for aid as they experience further deteriorations in their economic and social conditions.

Multilateral agencies and bilateral donors have more than enough reason to redirect aid to the mitigation of poverty. Poverty is considered to exacerbate conflicts due to unchecked income disparities, ethnic marginalization, and the marginalization of nations. It is considered more efficient to pre-empt potential conflicts through development assistance prior to the outbreak of violence, since the ensuing bitterness corrodes much of the delayed mitigation efforts (Muscat, 2002).

Unfortunately, while the challenge of world poverty may be getting more publicity and attention of policy makers yet its effective resolution remains just as elusive. The multidimensional means (including various shades of human rights, income-based or empowerment approaches) proffered to tackle the issue create much speculation, debate and controversy. Perhaps most disconcerting are claims that measures meant to alleviate poverty in effect are responsible for perpetuating it, or the fact that 'development' can and often does occur without alleviating poverty (Thomas and Allen, 2000). Furthermore, while it is no secret that the allocation of aid according to strategic considerations can impair aid effectiveness, yet the practice of using aid for political purposes unfortunately continues to prevail.

The Case of Pakistan

It is estimated that 44 per cent of the 1.2 billion people, living on less than $1 a day, are in South Asia. In Pakistan alone, 32.6 per cent of the Pakistani population (of over 140 million) was considered to be living in poverty at the end of the 1990s (World Bank, 2002).

When Musharraf took power in a coup d'etat in October 1999, financial aid in the form of bilateral and multilateral loans, as well as concessional grants and loans, dropped dramatically. The US imposed mandatory democracy sanctions and many financial agencies took their cue from this. After 11 September's events, however, many donors agencies decided to give Pakistan breathing space, not only in loans and grants, but also in debt re-servicing. The US $600 million package promised by the US could be described as a reward for cooperation. The country also increased its access to International Development Association (IDA) funds in the past financial year. Usually Pakistan's access to the IDA funds hover around US $500 million; these have increased by more than US $150 million (UNOCHA, 2004).

The US administration itself admits that Pakistan had suffered a $10 billion loss as a result of offering its land and air facilities and other logistic support in the fight against terrorism. General Zia received 4.2 billion dollars of aid and 40 F-16s from the US in return for offering the country as a frontline state and to fight the proxy war in Afghanistan in the 1980s. During Benazir Bhutto's first government, Pakistan received $4.6 billion and 60 F-16s from the US even though Pakistan did not have to pay the price of a frontline state (NCTA, 2004). Careful analysis of the $ 3 billion dollar aid package - half in economic and half in military assistance - spread over five years announced by Bush also dampened the initial euphoria. While it does not use the term, conditionality, but basically the kinds of demand being made on the country are no less demanding than those of the IFIs.

On their part, the IMF and World Bank did approve Pakistan's PRSP in early 2004. The joint IFI assessment has observed that the Pakistan's poverty reduction strategy now provides a coherent framework to address the lingering problem of poverty in the country (GoP, 2004). These are encouraging words, but the approach being adopted by the PRSP is not unique to Pakistan nor is its use without controversy. A UN report, based on a study of the experiences of nine African countries vis-à-vis the PRSP process, went so far as to conclude that the broad macro-economic objectives of the majority of the countries studied were inconsistent with their poverty reduction goals. Many local organizations have also questioned how restructuring, downsizing, cost-recovery and paying teachers less could in fact eliminate poverty in Pakistan. However, the PRSP has become an immensely important policy document for the GoP, and the PRSP is to outline the country's economic policy regime over the next few years. Besides the World Bank, other multilateral donors like the Asian Development Bank have also conditioned their funding to Pakistan on the PRSP, as have other bilateral donors.

Pakistan's PRSP still overtly considers fiscal stabilization as a precursor to poverty reduction. While Pakistan's economy has shown modest growth, the human development situation of the country is far from admirable. Serious disputes have emerged concerning the effectiveness of privatization, liberalization, removal of price supports, and regressive indirect taxation. Many do not believe these are legitimate and rational policies that will strengthen Pakistan's economy and reduce poverty (Ministry of Finance, 2003a).

The PRSP describes in some detail the Government of Pakistan's proposed initiatives on health, education, and other social sectors, there is always the nagging question of how such initiatives will be funded. It must be remembered that the same problem led to the eventual dismal performance of the Social Action Plans as well. The argument for privatization neglects the fact that the majority of the poor are simply unable to afford basic services when the market is allowed to determine prices. A recent study commissioned by the Gender Equity Project has found that marginalized communities including rural women across Pakistan are not at all prepared to deal with the increasing liberalization being thrust upon them (GEP, 2005). However, liberalization and privatization are likely to be perpetuated much more under the PRSP. The PRSP also proposes to resolve the water crisis in Pakistan by building more dams and irrigation channels (Ministry of Finance, 2003b). But, lessons from the past do not seem to have been learnt. Tarbela Dam, Ghazi Barotha Hydropower Project, Chashma Right Bank Irrigation Project, Chotiari Reservoir Project, and the National Drainage Program are some of the mega projects that have been completed or are near completion, in which there have been serious financial irregularities, along with displacement, loss of livelihood, and environmental damage.

It is ironic that the rhetoric in the PRSP lauds its participatory nature given that political parties have not been involved in this process at all. Neither is there evidence of trade unions, people's movements, civic and professional bodies, academics, or a host of other potential stakeholders having been consulted (Ali, 2004, SDPI 2002). So it is no more than wishful thinking that claims a process has encapsulated diverse views on the basis of a handful of so-called consultative meetings.

This sort of a sweeping generalization becomes particularly disturbing when identical claims are being made about PRSP processes in other countries besides Pakistan, which too have been vehemently refuted by their public interest organizations. Given its contentious approach and seeming lack of legitimacy, one hopes that the PRSP will not exacerbate the problem of poverty in Pakistan, particularly in view of the volatile political manoeuvres that the current regime has been compelled to undertake due to geo-strategic considerations.

Concluding Remarks

Campaigners point out several gaps between policy and practice to enhance aid effectiveness. Simultaneously, donor governments are being pressured to shift away from 'tied aid' to the adoption of measures that promote the incorporation of local firms in aid procurement to help build local skills and knowledge, and to enhance the real value of money being allocated to development by local sourcing of goods (Actionaid, 2002). According to the 'Reality of Aid' Group's assessments, that whatever aid is spent, gets skewed by donor interests and is taken away from the poorest towards middle-income countries and emerging markets. Because of distortions in the way that aid is managed and accounted for, less than half can really be said to be under local control. In the absence of leadership to restructure global financial, trade and environmental relations, aid alone is insufficient for achieving the lofty goal of poverty eradication (Randall & German, 1998).

In an ideal world, development aid would have become part of a wider redistributive mechanism aiming to foster social progress and development across the world. For now at least, aid for development remains part of an established world order that continues to tolerate and even manipulate the glaring phenomenon of poverty to push forth rather myopic policy agendas. Subsequently, the often repeated goals of pursuing pro-poor development strategies are simultaneously undermined by the politically motivated, tied and conditional requirements accompanying release of aid funds. This innate contradiction between intention and practice of giving aid requires serious introspection. Unless this vital realization translates into practice, half-hearted means devised to contain the dangerous malaise of poverty will remain ineffective.

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