

Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution

THOMAS CAROTHERS AND DIANE DE GRAMONT

A new lens on development is changing the world of international aid. The overdue recognition that development is an inherently political process is compelling aid providers to learn how to think and act politically. Donors have adopted political goals and are trying to work in politically informed ways. Yet this movement faces an array of external and internal obstacles, from resistance on the part of recipients to unchanging bureaucratic structures of aid management. Aid providers must do much more to make political understanding and action a coherent, consistent part of their work.

Key Themes

- Major international donors have long tried to avoid difficult political issues within developing countries by sticking to seemingly neutral technocratic approaches to socioeconomic change. This approach has weakened the aid endeavor, leading to programs that poorly fit local realities and result in negative, unintended political consequences.
- The end of the Cold War led to a major opening to politics in development work. Aid providers began adding political goals—
- above all democratic governance—to their agendas and trying more politically nuanced methods, such as directing more assistance to local civil societies rather than to host governments.
- Over the past decade, attention to politics has deepened, encouraging new types of political assistance, greater use of political economy analysis, efforts to integrate political approaches into traditional socioeconomic work, and more.

Findings

Incorporating political thinking and action into development aid is not a fad. It is a potentially fundamental advance in the aid community's conception of its goals and operations. Yet it remains at best a partially realized revolution.

Mainstream aid actors now pursue political goals, but their primary concerns remain socioeconomic. Political priorities such as democracy and human rights are often sidelined by countervailing donor interests and continuing uncertainty about their value for socioeconomic progress.

Major donors have made significant progress in adopting politically smart methods. The growing use of tools such as political analysis has helped aid practitioners navigate complex local realities. Yet these methods struggle against inflexible aid delivery mechanisms and entrenched technocratic preferences within aid organizations.

The politics agenda faces larger countervailing trends. These include growing sovereignty concerns within aid-receiving countries, the rise of new aid actors with divergent priorities, and increased pressure within aid agencies to demonstrate quick impact and easily quantifiable results.

Donors can and should take this agenda forward. Doing so will require a series of iterative changes to aid providers' operations and much closer adherence to stated political principles. The use of more political methods and greater pursuit of political goals are not magic bullets, but they will help overcome basic shortcomings that have plagued the field for decades.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Thomas Carothers is vice president for studies and director of the Democracy and Rule of Law Program at Carnegie. A leading authority on international support for democracy and governance, he has authored numerous critically acclaimed works on the topic.

Diane de Gramont, a Clarendon Scholar at Oxford University, was previously a researcher in the Democracy and Rule of Law Program at Carnegie.

CONTACT

Scott Toussaint
Government Affairs Manager
+1 202 939 2307
stoussaint@ceip.org

Charita Law
Media Manager
+1 202 939 2241
claw@ceip.org

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The world's first truly global think tank with operations in Washington, Moscow, Beijing, Beirut, and Brussels.

© 2013 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

The Carnegie Endowment does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented here are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Endowment, its staff, or its trustees.

CarnegieEndowment.org



@CarnegieEndow



facebook.com/
CarnegieEndowment