

HOW POPULISM IS DISTORTING THE AID DEBATE

Ben Taylor - 5th April 2017

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Ben Taylor explores how polarising populist arguments around aid add little to the debate over its future.

Why give aid?

Respondents to that question fall into a number of different camps. As a crude typology, firstly, you have the moral crusaders such as Peter Singer, who believe that all are created equal and it is an outrage to let others suffer while there is surplus elsewhere. Then you have the enlightened self-interested. The 'interest' with which this group are concerned is varied, ranging from future trading income, to soft power, to keeping the migrants and terrorists from coming to wreak havoc on our shores. Finally, you have the aid deniers - those who would answer the 'why give aid' question with "we shouldn't", prioritising the immediate interests of those in their own country over those of citizens of any other nation.

On this continuum, most would fall somewhere in the middle. In the case of enlightened self-interest, aid can be seen as a public investment addressing a market failure. The deferred gratification entailed in this justification runs contrary to a populist approach which screams 'we want it all and we want it now' and deludes its adherents that this is possible.

The impact on aid of the social and political turmoil culminating in the upsurge in populism in many donor nations, has been profound. As part of a shift towards more general isolationism, aid has come under scrutiny – arguably from those who have long seen it as a *bête noir* – and looks like becoming the sacrificial lamb at the austerity butchers. Last year funding to multilaterals came under scrutiny, now contractors and NGOs have drawn focus as the hatchet job continues. And not without cause...

Bad aid – low impact, unsustainable, wasteful, politically-motivated, and misdirected - has both caused and been caused by questionable practices of development implementers and new public management of aid agencies in a misplaced drive towards accountability. Bad aid has allowed the aid deniers to win an argument on terms on which it should never have been fought.

Whether you're a moral crusader or an enlightened self-interester, you're set to lose any argument if it can be demonstrated that aid is ineffective in achieving its stated goal.

How to make aid 'good'

Aid can be good. It can build local systems to be more inclusive in a way that is sustainable so that aid is no longer needed. Aid can be catalytic, leading to better access to goods and services for significant numbers of poor and marginalised people. It can ensure that poor people are better able to cope with shocks that might otherwise have resulted in disaster. Further, in achieving these goals,

it can yield dividends in terms of conflict mitigation, reduced migration, and improved trading relationships.

By failing to engage in the more nuanced arguments about how aid is used, which are often beyond the scope of a Daily Mail scandalised headline, those of us who think aid has the potential to do good are allowing the argument to revert to why and it is here that overly simplistic isolated cases of profiteering contractors, highly paid charity bosses, rich recipients, inappropriate distributions, and corrupt government are allowed to dominate the narrative. This point has recently been recognised by MPs in the UK, who have criticised DFID for reacting to negative media coverage of projects.

Let's not forget the what

Or perhaps we should? The narrative around aid is dominated by the 'what'. Just £7 can buy a bed net for this child. Refugees being given cash out of an ATM with your taxes! The 'solutions' to development problems are very rarely that, and their success, failure, or relevance is dependent on a huge range of other contextual factors. Are systems in place to incentivise bed net usage? How are replacements sourced if a net breaks? Are retailers of key goods and services responsive to refugees with purchasing power? Are there governance mechanisms to ensure that handouts are not distorting the local economy? Focusing on the 'what' is a simplistic distraction from the complex issues at hand when considering the political economy of aid.

Focusing on the 'what' inevitably leads to the question of how much? Framing the debate in these terms is what led to the enshrining in law of the 0.7% of GNI expenditure target in the UK. So the two camps become not just 'aid is good' versus 'aid is bad' but 'more' versus 'none'.

A populism of two halves

Populism in the aid debate is an issue which is a common feature at both ends of the political spectrum. Indeed, in the UK, surveys show that aid is, in fact, popular with 52% believing that it should be a government priority. The populism of the liberal left aims to cater to the moral crusaders among this 52% and as such are unable to engage in the nuanced arguments about aid quality. Similarly, the populism of the right courts the aid deniers highlighting examples of wastage. Indeed, it was no accident that, in 2010 amidst a discourse of austerity and cuts, David Cameron ring-fenced spending to DFID as one of only two departments, as a populist gesture to court support from the moral crusaders who would not normally have formed the base of Conservative support.

Shifting the debate to quality

By fuelling the debate with evidence of sustainable impact and discussion of the different mechanisms by which it was achieved, it is possible for people to find their own answers to the 'why' question. If aid works, it should be able to tick the boxes of self-interest and moral responsibility and an efficient use of resources simultaneously. The weak narrative on the mechanisms and effectiveness of aid, allow the stories about a 'fat cat' here and a 'cash machine' there to dominate discourse. Aid is, in many ways, broken. But proponents with the ability to shape a better future of aid, including policy makers, are afraid to do so for fear of being drawn into a falsely dichotomised position. Having allowed the discussion to be drawn into the very rationale for aid, critical proponents would be forced to defend it in light of what are seemingly indefensible incidents highlighted above.

For aid, then, those of us who see some validity in its rationale are obliged to step up and defend it lest it be consigned to the policy annals. To do so effectively in a climate that rewards dichotomisation and hyperbole means altering the eristic to one that considers means not ends.