

BOOK REVIEWS

INSTITUTIONALISED DREAMS: THE ART OF MANAGING FOREIGN AID

Drazkiewicz, Elzbieta. 2020. *Institutionalised dreams: The Art of Managing Foreign Aid*. New York – Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Ela Drazkiewicz is a social anthropologist specialising in organisational and political anthropology. Her research concerns development, globalisation and bureaucracy, with a focus on Poland and South Sudan. Currently, Ela is affiliated with the Institute for Sociology at the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

In this monograph, the author focuses on Poland's attempt to create its own foreign aid agency and apparatus. Nevertheless, the author hopes that readers will see beyond, as she calls it, "Polishness" and "Eastern Europeanness", and that this book will also represent the first step towards a wider debate about foreign aid, rather than just another case of non-Western donors. This book is not yet another debate seeking to understand the difference between Western and non-Western donors, nor is it a book about the effectiveness of aid projects. Instead, the author seeks to examine the processes behind the emergence of the aid industry to expose the "hidden curriculum" of aid practice and its side effects. In this book, the author demonstrates that, in order to understand international aid and development, we need to understand the social, political and cultural mechanisms that govern the work of the aid industry. As a result, the central questions guiding this book are: How does the need for aid arise? How do aid institutions emerge? What steps do states take to become donors?

The author emphasises that Western observers still define Poland as "a country getting to grips with being normal, which still feels apart from 'the West' and is struggling with poverty". Ultra-capitalist societies that endorse economic growth and whose primary focus is based on neoliberal values need "Others" as a measure of their own success. Because, if they are not the most successful, wealthy, productive, and innovative ones, who are they? (Drazkiewicz 2020, 4, 8). Poland, as an "Easterner", a post-socialist, underdeveloped country, represents "the other" on many levels. Realising this, the author proposes a shift in the study of foreign aid, which implies moving the discussions beyond specific projects towards the needs of local communities and conversations about how specific aid initiatives fit or do not fit into the local reality. If we want to move the

discussion forward, we have to start asking questions about the places from which aid originates, such as: What is the purpose of international engagement for donor societies? Furthermore, the author points out that we need to move away from research models that criticise the implementation techniques in the aid industry but leave the overall paradigm of aid intact.

By chronicling the creation of the Polish aid apparatus, this book demonstrates how the process of emerging as a donor requires constant manoeuvring between international pressures and domestic legal, socio-economic and political constraints. The creation of ‘new donors’ (non-DAC, emerging, non-Western), in fact, facilitated the Cold War-like competition among donors. Usually, “new donors” are presented as suspicious or even dangerous, while Western aid providers, by contrast, are more moral and more efficient.

The main novelty of this book is its unique approach, which maps out the interconnections between the realities in the country of project implementation and the region from which the aid originates. The book depicts how, in the process of emerging as a donor, the technocratic approach has gradually started to dominate the original endeavour. An aid activist suddenly turns into an aid expert; the volunteer-based grassroots society becomes a professional organisation. The creation of an effective Polish aid system has become an obsession among NGO activists. The book points out that the obsession with the creation of the perfect aid system is not typical only of so-called emerging donors, but it is characteristic of the aid industry in general. As a result, the process of emerging as a donor is never complete and never satisfactory; it can be perpetuated indefinitely until it reaches an abstract perfection (Ibid. 13-14).

There are two main actors in the book. These are the Department of Development Cooperation in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Polish Assistance for the International Needy (PAIN). The Ministry is responsible for managing the Polish Official Development Agency.

This book is organised into two parts and seven chapters. The first is concerned with the ideology of development aid. The second part is concerned with the stabilisation of those ideas and their institutionalisation.

As for the content, Chapter 1 serves as a historical and cultural background to this monograph. This chapter assesses the shifting position of Poland within the aid chain and demonstrates how this manoeuvring reflects major political changes in the world. The chapter outlines three historical stages. Firstly, it evokes past Polish involvement in various exchanges with African states when Poland, as a member of the Soviet Bloc, was actively involved in the decolonisation processes and modernisation schemes. Secondly, it discusses Polish experiences as a recipient of international aid. Finally, the chapter introduces the most recent,

post-EU membership era when, in order to finalise its return to Europe and the Western world, the country has relaunched its donor activities.

Chapter 2 explains the key historical, cultural and political mechanisms shaping Polish aid to Eastern Europe and Central Asia. This chapter also investigates the main discourse behind this international engagement and demonstrates that strong support for Polish involvement in the East is rooted in national ideologies and ideas.

Chapter 3 asks how support for other regions, specifically Africa, is mobilised. This chapter shows that in order to gain public support for Polish involvement in foreign aid, a connection with Africa and its citizens must be crafted.

In Chapter 4, the author demonstrates how supposedly secular and modernist values, visible in development education, are shaped by religious ideas of charity with specifically Catholic connotations. The chapter also discusses these issues by showcasing the stories of the PAIN and other NGOs, and their efforts to emerge as donors in South Sudan. It describes the process behind the allocation of funds in Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and demonstrates how religious institutions coexist in harmony with (supposedly) secular aid agents. This chapter shows how Catholic charitable thinking penetrates the moral economy of foreign aid. It argues that the role of the Catholic Church in Poland's emergence as a donor has a direct impact on the operational modes of foreign aid.

Chapter 5 shows that participation in foreign aid is equally motivated by the charitable and political need to assist those less fortunate, but also by a fascination with distant places and a passion for travel. The chapter re-examines the "narrative of virtues" that surrounds the aid industry. Furthermore, the chapter also shows the need for the constant expansion of aid activities. In the aid industry, it is difficult to achieve and measure success, yet the existence of aid agencies depends on their ability to demonstrate their positive impact.

Chapter 6 explains how aid activists, when defining their work and organisations, manoeuvre between satisfying their humanitarian vocation and fulfilling contemporary standards calling for the institutionalisation of social activism. The chapter debates whether aid work is a mission or a profession. Is it a personal matter or a strictly professional and structured task?

Chapter 7 continues the debate over the institutionalisation of the foreign aid machinery. It starts with the story of a failed aid project implemented in South Sudan. This chapter considers the obsession with reforming – though not abolishing – the system of governance. It discusses the phenomenon which the author defines as 'bureaucratic activism' – a form of social action in which the bureaucracy is not just an object of change, but a tool for it. This chapter also gives a detailed description of the ODA management system.

Both the biggest strengths and weaknesses of this book are embedded in its design. The unique approach that examines the dynamics of the donor is the greatest quality of the book. The biggest flaw is the lack of analysis of the effects of aid on the recipient countries. However, it is fair to say that it was the author's intention to choose this angle of research. To overcome this shortcoming and obtain a complete picture of the aid industry, the reader should read this book in conjunction with some of the books that analyse the effects of development aid on the recipient end, such as Jonathan Glennie's *The Trouble with Aid* (Glennie 2008) or Dambisa Moyo's classic *Dead Aid* (Moyo 2009).

References

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