



The globalization of foreign aid: developing consensus, by Liam Swiss

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BOOK REVIEW

The globalization of foreign aid: developing consensus, by Liam Swiss, Oxford, Routledge, 2018, 190 pp., ISBN: 978-0-203-70404-2 (e-book), 978-1-138-56984-3 (hard cover)

Liam Swiss' *The Globalization of Foreign Aid* reinvigorates the literature on bilateral aid by exploring, for what appears to be the first time, why donors with diverse political and economic contexts have remarkably similar aid priorities and institutions. Swiss argues that this homogenisation of foreign aid policy among donors is a result of the globalising influence of world society; that collection of donors, international organisations and civil society organisations who share world cultural norms around development assistance. The book draws on a mixed-methods case study approach to examine the influence of world society on the policy homogeneity between Sweden, the United States and Canada in the security-sector reform (SSR) and gender equality sectors.

To demonstrate that world society does have a globalising influence on donors, Swiss undertakes a macro-level quantitative analysis in the book's second chapter. He examines the influence of five macro-level mechanisms, including policy density, civil society embeddedness, international conferences and treaties, donor agency structure and donor generosity on policy adoption. While most of these macro-mechanisms had a demonstrable statistical effect on donor policy, these mechanisms appear to be more descriptive than explanatory. This highlights the need to consider these macro-level processes in conjunction with micro-level social processes.

Indeed, the strongest sections of the book are the qualitative empirical chapters (four and five) which provide valuable data and insight into the social processes within donor countries that mediate the influence of macro-level world polity mechanisms. This focus reflects a growing awareness of foreign aid scholarship to the centrality of aid agencies and bureaucrats to aid policy making (Gulrajani 2017; Lancaster 2008). Drawing on the work of contentious politics, including that of McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001), and extensive interview data, Swiss demonstrates that micro-level social mechanisms are an essential supplement to macro-level explanations.

In the gender equality sector, Swiss identifies three common mechanisms across the diverse cases studies considered that had an impact on donor gender equality policy adoption: donor embeddedness in domestic civil society, internalisation and certification and bureaucratic activism. While the impact of civil society seems to vary with donor context and issue area, the latter two highlight how aid bureaucrats are able to use macro-mechanisms like treaties, conferences and policy density to advocate for particular policies or mimic best practices from other donors. Crucially, these macro-level mechanisms act as an important source of legitimacy for activist bureaucrats trying to implement new policies.

Swiss identifies two micro-level social processes that conditioned SSR adoption: catalytic policy processes and asserting autonomy. The former once again highlights these macro-micro linkages as it refers to the impact of participation in global-level networks and working groups on donor policy choices, while the latter refers to the nature of a donor's aid agency relationship to the broader government apparatus. In this sector, policy adoption in forums like the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) "kick-started" donors' domestic policy adoption (p. 117). At the same time, the influence of the DAC was mediated by the relative autonomy of the aid agencies. The lack of autonomy of the US and Swedish agencies gave room for greater influence from other arms of government, for whom SSR was tied to national

interest, while the Canadian aid agency's relative autonomy led to less integration of SSR. This case also highlights how aid agency autonomy can determine whether aid policy is driven by national interests or more altruistic humanitarian concerns.

The final two chapters of the book compare the two sectors and conclude on the generalizability of the book's findings, as well as implications for academics and practitioners. Importantly, this sectoral comparison raises questions about the generalizability of Swiss' findings. The five micro-processes discussed in the empirical chapters do appear in both sectors, however to varying extents. For example, where civil society embeddedness did have an impact on gender equality policy in the United States and Sweden, this was neither the case in Canada nor in the SSR sector. This suggests, then, that the mechanisms Swiss discusses might have more to do with the dynamics of those particular sectors than with the development assistance world society more broadly.

Indeed, what is striking about this book, which purports to discuss policy homogeneity, is the surprising amount of heterogeneity that emerges from the empirical chapters. In his analysis of SSR, for example, Swiss notes that, despite consensus in policy, there have been rather divergent implementation outcomes (p. 102). Similarly, in the gender sector, while both Canada and Sweden adopted a Gender and Development approach, US programming remained largely linked to a Women in Development approach. Thus, one should not overstate the translation of policy consensus to everyday practices of donors, who often have large gaps between their policy rhetoric and practice. This might also speak to potential resistance dynamics to world society influence, which could be explored in further work on this issue.

Secondly, the book spends insufficient time on the origins of global aid policy priorities. Within particular bodies, like the DAC and the United Nations, these priorities are actively negotiated and *designed* to produce consensus. This is certainly the case with the recent Sustainable Development Goals, for instance. Micro-social processes at the international level, then, may also play an important part in explaining donor policy homogeneity. For example, what were the arguments, bargains or concessions made within the DAC during the policy formation stage? In this way, the analysis would have been strengthened by further consideration of the origins of world policy models.

Nevertheless, the book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the interaction between global development initiatives and donor state foreign aid policy, as well as to foreign aid policy theorising more broadly. It will also be of interest to sociologists interested in world society research and also those interested in the social dynamics within the global governance of development assistance.

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