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Filling Empty Promises? Foreign Aid and Human Rights Decoupling, 1981-2011

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ABSTRACT

Despite extensive literature examining human rights decoupling between treaty commitments and practices, little research has addressed how to fill these empty promises. This paper proposes a mechanism neglected in prior studies that might play an important role in narrowing human rights decoupling and improving world society model compliance: foreign aid. Using longitudinal analysis on a sample of 120 aid-receiving countries between 1981 and 2011, we find: total aid has a significant effect on reducing human rights decoupling; aid to good governance shows a similar pattern but the impact is much weaker; by contrast, aid to human rights has limited influence.

KEYWORDS

Human rights decoupling; institutionalism; norms; foreign aid; development

Introduction

Since World War II, respect for human rights has become a fundamental and widespread norm accepted by the international community. Even states ruled by the most repressive governments frequently make commitments to the international human rights law. Both the number of human rights treaties and the number of states ratifying these treaties have grown dramatically. However, states' increasing commitments to protect human rights do not yield a corresponding improvement in human rights practices (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Hathaway 2002; Keith 1999). Scholars of institutionalism frequently use the concept "decoupling" to describe the situation in which formal structures or policies are disconnected from actual practices (Meyer et al. 1997; Meyer and Rowan 1977). States dedicate themselves to human rights protections that they either do not intend to implement or lack the capacity to implement. This gap between policies and practices or principles and performance is arguably at the core of many development challenges.

Many studies have examined this problem of decoupling of human rights treaty ratifications from practices, but few attempted to give a possible solution. In this paper, we propose one resource which might reduce human rights decoupling gaps but has been overlooked in the previous literature: **foreign aid**. Particularly, our research questions are: (1) Whether and to what extent does aid influence human rights decoupling gaps in low- and middle-income countries? (2) Does aid targeted at good governance and human rights promote a tighter coupling of human rights policy and practice in aid recipient countries?

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Using fixed-effects longitudinal analysis on a sample of 120 aid-receiving low- and middle-income countries over 31 years, we show that: (1) total aid plays a significant role in closing human rights decoupling gaps between treaty ratification and performance in practice; (2) aid targeted at good governance shows a similar effect, but the magnitude of the effect is minimal; and (3) the narrowest category of aid with a sectoral focus on human rights has little impact on human rights decoupling.

Our contributions are threefold. First, although extensive research has examined human rights decoupling (Clark 2010; Cole and Ramirez 2013; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005), there has been no attention to the potential role of aid in closing these decoupling gaps. In the few studies exploring how foreign aid affects human rights practices, aid is usually understood as a tool of conditionality used by donors to promote good governance in recipient countries (Carnegie and Marinov 2017; Hafner-Burton 2014). This paper departs from these studies by taking an institutional perspective and conceiving of foreign aid as a transnational mechanism promoting common policies, institutions and norms within developing countries. In doing this, this study takes up Swiss' (2017, 2016b, 2016a, 2012) call to look more closely at the role of foreign aid in the diffusion of world society norms/models. Since the human rights regime is a prominent part of world society, examining aid as a mechanism through which human rights institutions and norms spread from North to South via aid funding and programs is a transnational process in need of more research attention.

Second, this study reveals a nuanced understanding of aid's impacts by examining three categories of aid flows and the relationship between aid and human rights decoupling. These findings have important significance for development researchers as well as practitioners. The problem of loose coupling of state policies from practice is so prevalent that it becomes taken for granted. Here we have no intention to claim that aid is the silver bullet solution to the problem of decoupling, but intend only to open a new research avenue of rethinking aid's role in narrowing of gaps in policy implementation, and in a broader sense, promoting world society model compliance.

Third, although Clark (2010) previously constructed a Human Rights Decoupling Index (HRDI), we extend his work with a revised index which improves on his in three important ways: (1) the data we use to build the new index is more comprehensive. Clark's HRDI has five waves between 1975 and 2000, while our new index includes 31 years from 1981 to 2011, which covers all the data in the Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Dataset; (2) decoupling indices consist of two components: treaty participation and human rights outcomes. However, Clark's approach of using raw counts of ratified treaties to measure the level of participation is problematic when accounting for treaty ratifications over time and may lead to bias. To limit this bias, we instead use a proportion of ratified treaties to available treaties for ratification in a given year – the details of which are elaborated in the methods section below; and (3) HRDI does not take the time gap of treaty implementation in consideration. Human rights treaties are unlikely to make a difference in practice the same year as ratification, so we construct different types of decoupling gaps based on human rights outcomes one year or two years after ratification to test the robustness of our results with various implementation time lags.

Background

Human Rights Decoupling: An Institutional Perspective

The concept of decoupling was originally developed in organizational studies of sociology. In their seminal article, Meyer and Rowan challenged the rational assumption about organizations and used a neo-institutional perspective to study organizational structures and practices. They found that organizations decouple their practices from formal structure to deal with institutional pressure: they adopt ceremonial structures to buffer against external demands and gain legitimacy, but rarely implement these structural elements in actual work activities (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Later, Meyer and his colleagues extended this institutional approach from organizations to nation-states and proposed the World Society theory. The core argument of this theory is that states become isomorphic because of their enactment of common models, norms, and policies in the world society to achieve legitimacy, but this isomorphic outcome is often limited to rhetorical planning and symbolic models, leading to the prevalence of decoupling between formal policies and observable practical actions (Meyer et al. 1997).

When it comes to the problem of decoupling in world society, "perhaps nowhere is decoupling more pronounced or better documented than in the international human rights regime" (Cole 2015a:360). On the one hand, we witness the creation of a broad range of human rights treaties to which the vast majority of states in the world voluntarily bind themselves in order to improve the fundamental rights of their citizens. But on the other hand, there has been no corresponding increase in human rights performance: repressions and abuses are still prevalent (Hathaway 2002; Keith 1999). Taken to its extreme, Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui (2005) describe a situation of "radical decoupling" where the adoption of a human rights treaty can have the opposite effect to which it was intended, followed by a lower level of human rights outcomes (Clark 2010; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2007).

Human rights decoupling is widespread since treaties' monitoring, compliance and enforcement mechanisms are weak, deficient, or absent (Neumayer 2005). However, some studies find that treaties may produce improved respects for human rights but this effect is conditional: democratic countries or countries in the process of democratization are more likely than nondemocratic countries to honor their treaty commitments (Neumayer 2005; Simmons 2009). This finding is far from surprising since democratic regimes have stronger rule-of-law mechanisms and more active civil society. This conclusion, however, only makes the problem of decoupling more serious: human rights treaties have their strongest effects where they are least needed while failing to make a difference among governments that are the primary target of the human rights regime – the world's worst abusive, autocratic countries (Cole 2015b; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2007).

The institutional perspective provides a convincing framework to explain the issue of human rights decoupling of policies from practices. Following the Second World War, human rights norms became central to the global community's core values and fundamental beliefs. As a result, international treaties are a highly institutionalized model which is hard for even repressive states to reject if they want to legitimate themselves in world society (Cole 2012; Cole and Ramirez 2013). Ratifying these human rights treaties is a manner through which countries signal their legitimacy to the world society (Wotipka and Tsutsui 2008). From this perspective, it is not hard to understand why abusive governments frequently make commitments to human rights treaties, often at rates equal

to rights-respecting countries (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2007). By ceremonially adopting international human rights treaties, governments especially repressive ones attempt to fend off external criticisms of domestic human rights violations and meet external legitimacy expectations, but in fact, these countries have no intention or capacity to translating these international principles into local practices (Hafner-Burton, Tsutsui, and Meyer 2008). To be sure, the varieties of decoupling are diverse. Some countries might adopt human rights obligations and then actively work to avoid delivering on them; others might have the best of intentions, but lack sufficient resources or capacity. Clark (2010) calls this latter group "institutional states" – countries which are likely to adopt human rights treaties at similar rates to wealthy western countries, but which are resource-deprived and dependent upon external assistance to effectively implement human rights obligations. Such cases might also result in what Bromley and Powell (2012) term "means-ends decoupling", where the gap is not necessarily between policy and practice, but instead between practices and outcomes. This could occur in cases where countries put in place structures and practices to deliver on treaty obligations but fail to close gaps between the practices of the state and actual human right outcomes. For instance, weak or underfunded human rights commissions or other compliance practices might lead to such "means-end" decoupling in the human rights field. Here, countries might symbolically adopt the treaty and the practices associated with it, but still fail to deliver rights to their citizens in a meaningful way.

The existence of human rights decoupling is well established in the previous literature, but very few studies attempted to address these empty promises. To fill this knowledge gap, we examine a neglected mechanism which might play a significant role in improving state compliance with international treaties and reduce human rights decoupling: foreign aid.

Aid and Human Rights Decoupling

Donors have been interested in "good governance" since the 1990s, when research emerged from the World Bank suggesting that aid could better support economic growth in better governed states (Burnside and Dollar 1997). Focused initially on the conditions for economic growth, market regulation, and neoliberal reforms, donor definitions of good governance soon broadened to include a range of political institutions and practices, including issues of democracy and human rights. In the process, the World Bank's narrow economic view of "good governance" gave way to a more nebulous set of political conditions viewed as beneficial to aid. Donors attempted to be selective about providing aid to better governed recipients (Neumayer 2003a, 2003b), but the application of aid selectivity and conditionality on governance terms was sometimes piecemeal at best, often prioritizing economic factors over political, democratic, or human rights issues (Hout 2002).

Within this governance framework, the relationship between aid levels and human rights has most often been examined from the perspective of how aid levels respond to the human rights records of recipient countries. Indeed, even as early as the 1980s, research showed that US bilateral aid was distributed partially on the basis of the human rights performance of recipient countries (Abrams and Lewis 1993; Cingranelli and Pasquarello 1985). Other evidence of this relationship is less clear-cut, with Lebovic and Voeten (2009) finding that while multilateral aid provided by the World Bank did respond to countries facing human rights sanction by the UN, bilateral aid levels appeared unaffected. Likewise, while Neumayer (2003a, 2003b) and Hout (2012) find that most major donors do not allocate

their bilateral aid on the basis of a country's respect for human rights, Carey (2007) shows that some European donors aid is responsive to improvements in recipient country human rights practices.

In contrast, less cross-national quantitative research has examined aid's role in promoting human rights directly. Most often addressed in the context of studies of aid and democracy promotion, or in studies of aid conditionality (Brown 2005), understanding of the role of aid in promoting human rights requires further attention from researchers. Unlike previous studies which simply predict aid's effect on human rights promotion, we examine the influence of aid on the gap between human rights commitments and human rights practices – the human rights decoupling gap. Two mechanisms through which aid may prove influential to human rights policy and practice and narrow human rights decoupling gaps are relevant here: (1) aid conditionality; and (2) targeted aid programming to human rights reforms and institutions.

First, via conditionality, donors have been found to reward and punish human rights or governance performance of recipient countries via a "carrot and stick" approach (Carnegie and Marinov 2017; Molenaers, Dellepiane, and Faust 2015, Molenaers, Gagiano, Smets, Dellepiane 2015); however, recent research suggests that it is sometimes difficult for donors to follow-through on threats of aid suspension even in the face of rights violations (Swedlund 2017) and that donors often impose conditions or sanctions on poor human rights performers in a very selective manner (Nielsen 2013). Despite these potential difficulties and selectivity in aid conditions, we expect greater levels of total aid to contribute via conditionality to more tightly coupled human rights regimes. As such, our first hypothesis is:

H1: The more total aid a developing country receives, the lower the level of human rights decoupling will be.

Second, we expect aid to reduce human rights decoupling via aid programs and funding targeted directly at human rights and good governance institutions and reforms. Such programs should target both policy-practice and means-ends decoupling by bringing policy and practice closer together and by ensuring practices indeed lead to intended human rights outcomes (Bromley and Powell 2012). As recent research on aid and world society suggests (Dawson and Swiss 2020; Swiss 2016b), since international human rights are among the most prominent global norms, aid is a mechanism of dissemination for world society models which can promote human rights and narrow human rights decoupling gaps. Using cross-national, longitudinal analysis, Carnegie and Marinov (2017) show that when aid recipient countries receive an injection of aid from European donors, they experience an immediate bump in their human rights performance. Furthermore, at the project level, the popularization of the "rights-based approach" to aid programming by many development actors has resulted in many initiatives to combat poverty and inequality through applying a human rights lens to development challenges (Broberg and Sano 2018). We examine this mechanism in our analysis by hypothesizing that aid generally (see H1 above), and more specifically aid targeted at governance and human rights will have an ameliorative effect on human rights decoupling in low- and middle-income aid recipient countries. Our remaining two hypotheses are therefore:

H2: The more aid to good governance a developing country receives, the lower the level of human rights decoupling will be.

H3: The more aid to human rights a developing country receives, the lower the level of human rights decoupling will be.

Data and Method

Sample

Our sample is structured in country-year format and consists of all aid-receiving low- and middle-income countries between the years of 1981 and 2011. We exclude any countries above middle-income status in the year 1987 per World Bank income category criteria.[1] Focusing on low- and middle-income countries, which are the primary target of foreign aid, can help us to establish a more convincing picture of how aid contributes to the diffusion of common norms such as respect for human rights from North to South within developing countries. Owing to missing data on some covariates, the sample size in our analysis varies with data availability on the primary independent variables: our largest sample includes 2,253 observations (120 countries) and the smallest sample has 1,853 observations (111 countries).

Methods

Owing to the nature of our panel data, we use two-way fixed-effects longitudinal regression to assess the effects of three types of aid on human rights decoupling gaps over time. Using this technique of fixed effects for both countries and years allows us to account for all unobserved and time-invariant heterogeneity within countries and common characteristics to all countries in a specific year. A Hausman test also suggests that the fixed effects approach is favored over random effects regression. Besides, time-series–cross-section data always concerns scholars for the heterogeneity across panels and time serial autocorrelation within panels; to address these issues, we use the technique of clustering on countries suggested by Wooldridge (2016) to obtain robust standard errors and test statistics. We estimate our models based on the following specification:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Aid_{it-1} + \beta_2 Z_{it-1} + \beta_3 Country_i + \beta_4 Year_t + \varepsilon$$

where i and t are index for country and years respectively; Y represents the decoupling gap between treaty policies and practices; Aid is the independent variable, including three categories of aid flows; Z is a matrix of control variables and ϵ is the error term; $Country_i$ are country-specific intercepts and $Year_t$ are year-specific dummies. All independent variables are lagged by one year behind the dependent variable to allow time for aid programming to take effect and to minimize the influence of simultaneity bias on our findings. That is, we predict human rights decoupling one year following the investment of aid. Meanwhile, we also conduct robustness tests without this lag and lagged by two years and three years respectively; and all the results remain substantively the same.

Measures

Dependent Variable

We construct an index for measuring human rights decoupling gaps in three steps. First, we build a performance index assessing human rights performance. Data on this variable are drawn from the Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Dataset (Cingranelli, Richards, and Chad Clay 2014), which contains information on government respect for 15 internationally recognized human rights in 202 countries from 1981 to 2011. The CIRI dataset includes a variety of indicators measuring the human rights practices of governments, including: (1) *the physical integrity rights index*, which measures disappearances, extrajudicial killing and torture, ranging from 0 (no government respect for these four rights) to 8 (full government respect for these four rights); (2) *the empowerment rights index*, which assesses electoral self-determination, workers' rights, and freedom of association, movement (foreign and domestic), speech and religion. It ranges from 0 (no government respect for these seven rights) to 14 (full government respect for these seven rights); (3) *the women's rights index*, which includes three indicators measuring women's economic, political and social rights. A score of 0 on each of these three indicators suggest the absence of rights for women in law, 1 indicates the existence of some rights but without effective enforcement, 2 means the presence of some rights with effective enforcement, but with discriminations in practice, and 3 indicates that women's rights are fully guaranteed by the law and vigorously enforced in practice. This index of women's rights ranges from 0 to 9; and (4) *the judicial independence index*, which indicates the degree to which the judiciary is independent of control from other sources: a score of 0 indicating "not independent", 1 indicating "partially independent" and 2 indicating "generally independent" (Cingranelli, Richards, and Chad Clay 2013). We assign equal weight to each of four indices and build a combined index of human rights performance ranging from 0 to 8.25. If no data are available for a given year, we substitute the previous year's figure to maximize the number of observations in the dataset. Higher scores suggest better human rights practices and our sample has a mean human rights performance of 4.03.

Second, we create an index measuring human rights treaty participation. This variable is operationalized by the percentage calculated from the count of human rights treaties ratified by a country to the number of possible global human rights treaties available for ratification in a specific year. Prior research uses the number of ratified treaties to measure the level of a country's participation or commitment to the international human rights regime (Clark 2010; Hafner-Burton, Tsutsui, and Meyer 2008). But previous research overlooks a problem with this approach: that a state ratifies more treaties does NOT necessarily mean it has a higher level of participation; instead, it could simply be the result of more available treaties for ratification. For example, a country ratifying 10 treaties in 2005 seems to have a higher level of participation than a country ratifying 9 treaties in 1997 if we use the raw count; but actually the former case has a lower level of treaty participation since there are 13 treaties available for ratification in 2005 while the maximum number of available treaties is 9 in 1997; i.e., ratifying 9 treaties means full participation in the international human rights regime.

This participation index ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 means no treaty participation and 1 indicates a full participation. For instance, if a state ratified 9 human rights treaties in 2000,

then the participation index is 0.75 since the available treaties for ratification are 12 in that year.

Data on treaty ratification are drawn from the office of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR 2018) and there are 9 core international human rights instruments and 9 optional protocols.[2]

Figure 1 compares the two measures of human rights treaty participation. The difference is clear that the level of the average state's treaty participation has been increasing all the time in terms of the raw count, but the participation index measured by the percentage of ratified treaties to available treaties shows a very different pattern: the average state has a lower level of treaty participation in 2008 (0.53) than in 1998 (0.64). The mean of the participation index in our sample is 0.53.

Finally, we construct the index measuring human rights decoupling gaps by differencing the performance index from the treaty participation index. Because these two variables are measured by different scales and lack a comparable metric, we standardize both of them before differencing.

Human rights decoupling means records of respect for human rights fall short of treaty commitments. Thus, if this index of gap is above 0, there is human rights decoupling since the levels of treaty commitment are relatively higher than human rights performance, and lower scores indicate a lower level of gaps in implementation. If the index falls below 0, it means there is not decoupling since promises for protecting human rights have been achieved, and sometimes, the human rights practices even outperform treaty commitments.

In our sample, the human rights decoupling gap index ranges from −2.52 to 2.93. Particularly, Nicaragua in 1986 displayed the largest decoupling index gap (2.93) between treaty commitments and human rights practices; the other top 4 cases of decoupling are: Nigeria in 2010 (2.82), Democratic Republic of Congo in 2001 (2.77) and Azerbaijan in 2003

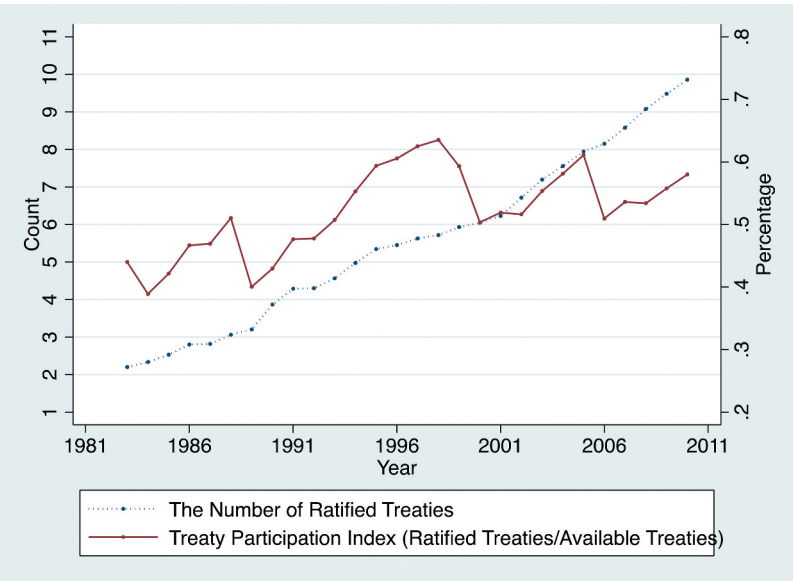

Figure 1. The number of human rights treaties the average state ratified VS. The percentage of ratified treaties to available treaties for ratification.

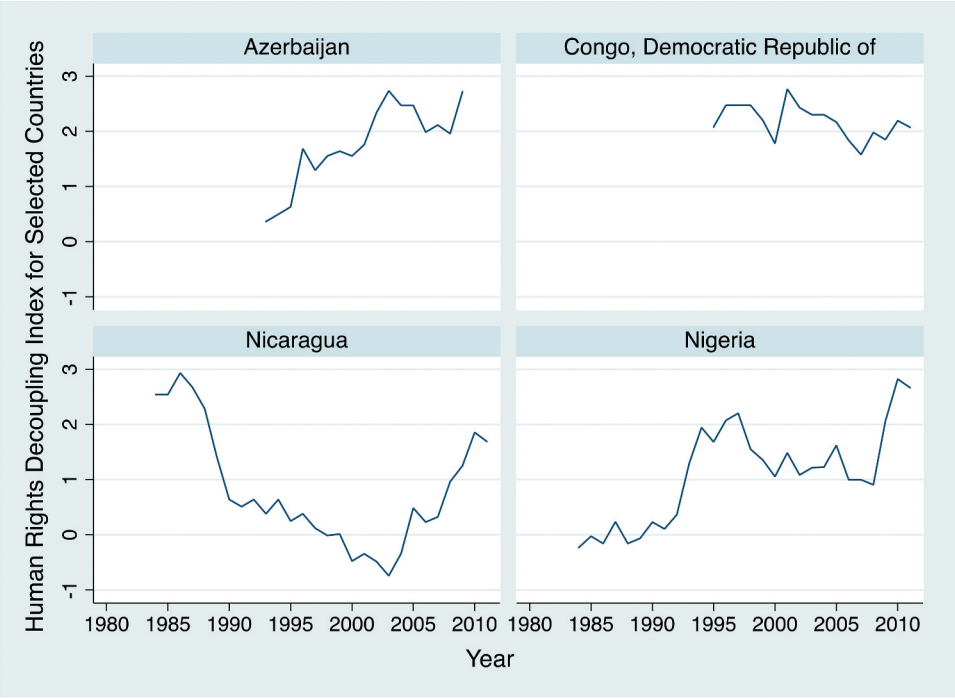

Figure 2. Human rights decoupling gaps by country.

(2.73). Figure 2 demonstrates how the decoupling gap evolves over time for these four countries. As we can see, although Nicaragua had a high level of decoupling in 1980s, this gap declined dramatically after 1987 and even dropped below zero in 1998 and remained negative from 2000 to 2004, which means no decoupling during that time; however, this was followed by a rapid increase in the decoupling index that rose above zero in 2005 and remained positive for the remainder of the period. The other three countries showed that most values of the decoupling index are above 0 from 1981 to 2010, which suggests limited implementation of human rights treaties in these countries during most of the time over the period.

The Pearson's correlation coefficient between human rights decoupling index and the level of rights performance is −0.6. While there is a strong negative correlation between rights decoupling and rights performance, it is clear that our decoupling index measure goes beyond capturing poor rights performers to measuring the gap between human rights treaty participation and performance. In this respect, there are countries in our sample with very poor rights performance and very limited treaty participation where decoupling is low. For example, South Africa in 1987 is in the bottom quartile of human rights decoupling (decoupling index is 0.09, approximately zero), even though they have notoriously poor human rights performance (performance index is 1.25; this index ranges from 0 to 8.25 and the mean is 4.03). By constructing human rights decoupling index and using it as the dependent variable, we are not simply capturing aids influence on poor rights performers, but instead the influence of aid on narrowing the decoupling gap.

In addition, Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui (2007) make a point that it takes time for laws to be successfully implemented, so human rights treaties are unlikely to make a difference in practice the same year as ratification. Therefore, we also construct decoupling gaps which are operationalized by differencing the human rights performance index one year and two years after ratification from participation index respectively (Participation Index$_t$–Performance Index$_{t+1}$; Participation Index$_t$–Performance Index$_{t+2}$) and conduct robustness check. All findings in this study remain substantively the same.

Independent Variables

The purpose of this study is to better understand the effects of aid on promoting treaty compliance and closing decoupling gaps. To test our hypotheses, we focus on three categories of aid flows which measure aid at the aggregate level, narrow to a sectoral focus on good governance, and then to a more specific target at improving human rights. Data on our aid measures are drawn from the AidData Core Research Release, Version 3.1 (Tierney et al. 2011). This is the fullest available dataset tracking all forms of international development flows from bilateral and multilateral aid organizations, including official development assistance (ODA), other official flows (OOF), export credits, and equity investments. The three independent variables are:

Total Aid. The original variable of total aid is measured in constant 2011 USD. Based on Henderson's research (2019), we use the following steps to transform this variable: first measure aid as a percentage of recipient countries' GDP to account for the economy size and then use a two-year moving average to smooth dramatic changes in total aid volumes and adjust for the lag time between aid commitment and disbursement. In our sample, the median total aid one country received is 6% of its GDP. Finally, we log-transform this variable to correct its high skewness.

Aid to Good Governance. The AidData dataset uses coalesced purpose coding (modified from the OECD DAC's sectoral codes) to classify how aid dollars are spent. Our measure for aid to good governance includes all aid given by donors coded as falling under the sector code for promoting democracy, human rights, civil society or, in a word, good governance (code 15100–15170). We use the same above steps to transform this variable, and 105 cases with zero values were dropped.[3] Aid to good governance in our sample ranges from countries receiving approximately zero aid in a given year to a maximum as 22% of GDP.

Aid to Human Rights. The last category of aid flow in our analyses is the narrowest one, which reflects aid targeted at the aspect of improving human rights. This measure for aid to human rights with sector codes 15160 and 15162 is a subgroup of the second category. This variable contains a large number of zero values; in fact, 64.67% (1241 out of 1919) of observations in our sample receive no aid in support of human rights. So first, we build a dummy variable to compare cases that receive this category of aid with those that do not.[4] Second, given a large number of zeroes, when using the above procedure to transform this variable, we take the natural log after imputing zero values with the sample mean, which is 6.09×10^{-4}% of GDP. Sample size of the second human rights aid measure (% GDP, moving-average, log-transformed) is slightly larger than that of the first dummy measure due to the two-year averaging effect.

Control Variables

Very few studies have examined human rights decoupling directly. Since the decoupling index consists of two components, i.e., human rights records and the level of treaty commitments, our control variables are derived from previous literature exploring factors shown to affect these two components.

First, to account for other factors that may influence human rights practices, we include:

Economic Development. Prior research shows economic development is negatively associated with levels of repression and abuse (Clark 2010; Cole and Ramirez 2013; Hafner-Burton 2008). GDP per capita is a standard measure of the levels of economic development for a country. The median GDP per capita in our sample is about 1281.56 USD. This variable is measured in 2010 constant US dollar term and logged to correct for skewness (World Bank 2018).

Population Size. Population pressure increases the potential for human rights violations due to greater levels of competition for resources (Cole and Ramirez 2013; Hafner-Burton 2008; Keith 1999), so we include the population size to adjust for its influence. Countries in our sample range from a minimum population of 412660 (Solomon Islands in 2000) to nearly 1.33 billion (China in 2009). This measure comes from the World Bank (2018) and is log-transformed due to skewness.

Democracy. Democratic states tend to show more respect for human rights, while undemocratic countries often engage in violations (Cole 2015b; Cole and Ramirez 2013; Hafner-Burton 2008; Poe and Tate 1994). The level of democracy in a country is measured by the Polity IV index of democracy/autocracy (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 2017), ranging from −10 (most autocratic) to +10 (most democratic). In our sample, the mean level of democracy is 0.69.

INGO Memberships. The number of connections a country has to international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) is often correlated with improved respect for human rights (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005). This INGO membership measure is a count of country-level memberships in INGOs drawn from the Union of International Association data (Pearce 2016). This variable ranges from 1 to 3176 and is also logged to correct for skewness.

Trade Openness. Total trade openness is believed to have a positive effect on human rights practice (Richards, Gelleny, and Sacko 2001). Following existing studies (Clark 2010; Cole and Ramirez 2013), we use total trade volume as a percentage of GDP to measure a country's trade openness and draw this measure from the World Bank. The mean level of trade openness is 68.65% based on our sample.

Civil War. Research has found a significantly positive relationship between civil war and human rights abuses (Cole and Ramirez 2013; Hafner-Burton 2008; Poe, Tate, and Keith 1999). Civil war is measured by a dummy variable, coded as a 1 for countries which experienced any intrastate conflict resulting in at least 25 battle deaths in that year according to the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database version 18.1 (Gleditsch et al. 2002; Pettersson and Eck 2018).

Finally, we also consider a variety of controls to account for additional factors linked to state decisions on treaty participation. Not surprisingly, the group of controls used in predicting human rights participation is essentially the same as those variables reviewed above associated with human rights performance, including GDP per capita (Cole 2005; Wotipka and Tsutsui 2008), population (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2007; Hafner-Burton, Tsutsui, and Meyer 2008), polity (Cole 2009; Hathaway 2003), INGO memberships (Wotipka and Tsutsui 2008), trade openness (Hafner-Burton, Tsutsui, and Meyer 2008), civil war (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2007). Based on existing studies, therefore, we include these six variables to control for influences on human rights decoupling. Our choice of these antecedents is also consistent with the study of Clark (2010). All of the control variables are lagged by one year in our analyses. Table 1 lists means, standard deviations, and the minimum and maximum values for all variables used in regression models.

Results

Table 2 reports the results of fixed effects models testing Hypotheses 1 and 2, namely, how foreign aid generally and aid to good governance affect human rights decoupling

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max	N
Human Rights Decoupling Index	0.55	0.64	0.95	−2.45	2.93	2253
Total Aid (% GDP, 2-year average)	0.08	0.06	0.09	1.6e-6	0.99	2253
Aid to Governance (% GDP, 2-year average)	0.0053	0.0017	0.013	1.6e-9	0.22	2148
Aid to Human Rights (% GDP, 2-year average)	6.09e-6	0	0.00002	0	0.0004	1919
Aid to Human Rights (Dummy)	0.26	0	0.44	0	1	1853
GDP per capita	2098.70	1281.56	2844.47	160.32	32699.61	2253
Population (millions)	49.12	9.51	171.20	0.41	1331.26	2253
Polity2	0.69	1.00	6.42	−10.00	10.00	2253
INGO Memberships	715.22	593.00	512.93	1	3176	2253
Trade (% of GDP)	68.65	59.49	37.64	0.02	333.15	2253
War	0.19	0	0.39	0	1	2253

Table 2. Two-way fixed-effects regressions of human rights decoupling on total aid and aid to good governance.

	Controls	Total Aid (logged)		Aid to Good Governance (logged)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Foreign Aid		−0.14***	−0.15***	−0.044**	−0.035*
GDP per capita	0.18		0.0069		0.29
Population	1.05*		0.87		1.13*
Democracy	−0.013		−0.011		−0.015
INGO membership	0.33**		0.38***		0.28*
Trade (% of GDP)	−0.0015		−0.00080		−0.00086
Civil war	0.24*		0.21*		0.23*
Constant	−19.5*	−0.25	−16.1	−0.20	−21.6*
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N (Observations)	2253	2253	2253	2148	2148
N (States)	120	120	120	111	111
R^2 Overall	0.15	0.13	0.16	0.12	0.15

* $p < 05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

respectively. Model 1 first assesses the influences of control variables proven to be important in previous literature. Models 2 and 3 proceed to focus on the effect of total aid: model 2 is a bivariate model with the independent variable alone, which shows a significantly negative association with the human rights decoupling index. After we add all covariates to model 3, there is very little change in the effect of total aid in multivariate models, providing evidence for Hypothesis 1. Specifically, a 10% increase in the percentage of total aid to GDP is expected to reduce the decoupling index by 0.0143 (0.15*In (1 + 0.1)), other things being equal. Figure 3 illustrates a more direct interpretation of the results of model 3, plotting the predicted values of decoupling gaps at different levels of total aid while setting all control variables at their mean values. We can see that if total aid as a percentage GDP increases from 13.53% (e^{-2}) to 36.79% (e^{-1}), the decoupling index is predicted to decrease from 0.38 to 0.23, ceteris paribus. These findings support Hypothesis 1: the more foreign aid one country receives, the lower the level of human rights decoupling it will experience. We also test the robustness of these results by changing the lag time between treaty ratification and human rights records, and the lag time for aid to take effect, all findings from these models remain substantially unchanged.

Models 4 and 5 test the effect of aid with a more specific target on promoting good governance. Both bivariate and multivariate models support Hypothesis 2; i.e., aid flows in support of good governance programming promote a tighter coupling of human rights policies and practices in developing countries. These results are similar to what we find in models 2 and 3, except the coefficients of aid to good governance are smaller. Based on model 5, Figure 4 shows how the human rights decoupling index is predicted to diminish as aid to good governance increases. Particularly, when targeted good governance aid as a percentage of GDP rises from 13.53% (e^{-2}) to 36.79% (e^{-1}), we see the human rights decoupling index decline from 0.41 to 0.38. Clearly, compared with total aid's impact, the

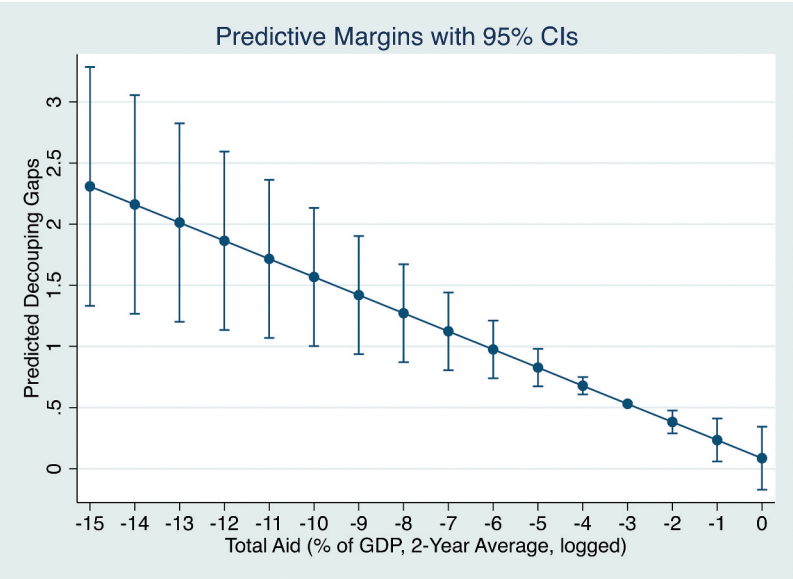

Figure 3. Predicted effects of total aid on human rights decoupling gaps. Predicted Values are obtained by holding all control variables at their mean values.

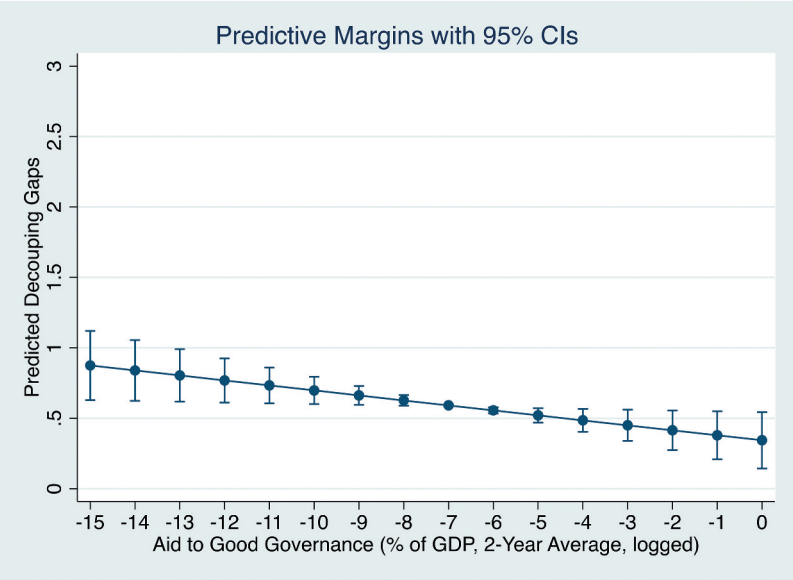

Figure 4. Predicted effects of aid to good governance on human rights decoupling gaps. Predicted Values are obtained by holding all control variables at their mean values.

effect of aid to good governance on closing decoupling gaps is much weaker and quite modest.

Finally, in Table 3, we turn to aid targeted at improving human rights as its principal objective. Our analytical approach is still the same: first assessing the influences of control variables, then estimating the bivariate model and finally testing a full multivariate model with all controls. Models 7 and 8 focus on aid to human rights as a dummy variable, showing that this narrowest category of aid is associated with a lower level of human rights decoupling. As shown in model 8, decoupling gaps in countries that receive aid to promote human rights are seen to be 0.092 lower than those in countries with no human rights aid,

Table 3. Two-way fixed-effects regressions of human rights decoupling on aid to human rights.

	Controls	Aid to Human Rights (dummy)		Aid to Human Rights (logged)	
	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Aid to Human Rights		−0.097*	−0.092*	−0.0084	0.0037
GDP per capita	0.0061		0.019		0.0079
Population	0.52		0.50		0.52
Democracy	−0.016*		−0.016*		−0.016*
INGO membership	0.29**		0.29**		0.29**
Trade (% of GDP)	−0.0017		−0.0015		−0.0017
Civil war	0.12		0.11		0.12
Constant	−9.91	0.30***	−9.56	−0.051	−9.87
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N (Observations)	1919	1853	1853	1919	1919
N (States)	111	111	111	111	111
R^2 Overall	0.22	0.045	0.23	0.066	0.22

* $p < 05$, ** $p < 01$, *** $p < 001$.

other things held constant. However, coefficients on aid to human rights as a percentage of GDP in model 9 and model 10 become insignificant.[5] Robustness tests with different time lags also suggest that there is no robust evidence to support Hypothesis 3.

As to control variables, the most interesting finding is that INGO memberships have a significant effect on widening human rights decoupling gaps. This result, though counter-intuitive, is consistent with previous research on human rights decoupling from a World society perspective (Clark 2010). INGOs exert great isomorphic pressure by encouraging states to adopt human rights treaties, but many countries may have limited capacity or willing to improve human rights practices. Polity IV is also predicted to reduce the decoupling index significantly in Table 3. This finding echoes previous studies showing that democracy is the most consistent and reliable predictor of human rights protection and treaty compliance (Cole and Ramirez 2013; Cole 2015b; Hafner-Burton 2008; Neumayer 2005; Poe and Tate 1994; Poe and Tate 1994; Simmons 2009).

Discussion

Although a sizable literature has examined the issue of decoupling of human rights treaties from practice, few efforts have been made to address how to narrow these decoupling gaps. Building on an institutional perspective, this study proposes a neglected mechanism – foreign aid, and discusses its potential role in improving treaty compliance and promoting a tighter coupling of human rights commitments and practices. We first construct an index for measuring the degree of decoupling and then assess how three categories of foreign aid influence the decoupling index respectively. Several interesting findings emerged from the results, including some that run contrary to our hypotheses and we will briefly discuss three of the most salient.

First, although many studies question the effectiveness of foreign aid (Easterly 2002; Easterly and Pfutze 2008; Easterly and Williamson 2011; Moyo 2009), our evidence demonstrates that aid works and it matters in terms of advancing policy implementation. Our findings may have an important implication for the discussion of aid working as a vehicle to spread global norms. Particularly, aid is associated with improved human rights treaty compliance and reduced decoupling gaps between human rights policies and practices in low- and middle-income countries. This finding echoes previous research which sees aid tied to improved human rights performance in recipient countries (Carnegie and Marinov 2017). Beyond simply improving human rights performance in a country, our evidence suggests that aid is associated with bringing that performance closer to the human rights obligations that a country has made.

Second, because aid funding is used to support many types of economic, social, and political reforms and programs, our study shows it is important to try and understand the different effects of aid flows disaggregated by purpose. To get at this more nuanced understanding of aid's role, we examine the impact of not only one, but three categories of aid flows at different levels: total aggregated aid, aid focused on good governance, and aid targeted at improving human rights. Our evidence shows total aid plays a more significant role than sector-focused aid in enhancing developing states' treaty compliance and narrowing decoupling gaps. Aid targeted at good governance shows a similar, significant effect, but the magnitude of the effect is smaller. Furthermore, the presence of targeted human rights aid predicts a modest narrowing of the decoupling gap, yet, the overall amount of that

targeted aid is not associated with significant changes in decoupling. One possible explanation for this counterintuitive result is that when donors are selective about where to spend their aid funds, human rights-focused aid funding may specifically target those countries where decoupling gaps are already reduced due to other factors. For instance, donors would be more able to deliver human rights-related programming in countries with greater receptivity to human rights norms or capacity to implement them, than in more ineffectual or rights-abusing states. Another explanation for the limited influence of targeted human rights aid when aggregated at the national level is that the nature of many human rights-based aid projects is often more localized to certain communities and marginalized groups; as such, even when progress on human rights can be shown in the small scale, it may not aggregate to national level indices like the Cingranelli-Richards Index. For instance, research by Broberg and Sano (2018) shows examples of how rights-based approaches to gender violence in India (by a local NGO) and Bangladesh (by Danish donor agency DANIDA) both translated into helping women be more effective rights-holders locally, but did not necessarily manifest in wider institutional reforms. In this way, the human rights situation of marginalized groups in society might be improved by an aid intervention, yet the needle may not shift on a national-level index of those same rights.

Finally, unlike much world society literature that links the increased presence of INGOs in a country with a greater likelihood of adopting human rights treaties (Wotipka and Tsutsui 2008), our findings show that a greater presence of INGOs in a country is associated with wider decoupling gaps. This counterintuitive finding for one of our control variables might at first raise alarm at the potentially deleterious effect of INGOs on human rights in low- and middle-income countries, but this result echoes Clark's (2010) finding that "membership in IOs appears to oversocialize states to adopt human rights models but has no efficacy in actually improving human rights practices" (87). In this respect, INGOs contribute to increasing decoupling in weaker states by promoting the adoption of human rights treaty instruments, but not effectively ensuring the same states have the capacity to implement them.

Conclusion

The problem of human rights decoupling is so pervasive in the present era that it raises the question of international laws' efficacy and poses challenges to the development process. If widely accepted international principles can only work superficially and many developing countries only adopt international policies symbolically without translating them into local practices, how effective can the development agenda be? This study examines one transnational mechanism for narrowing these gaps – foreign aid – and shows how human rights outcomes and treaties become more tightly coupled with the increase of aid flow to low- and middle-income countries.

By examining how aid affects human rights decoupling of treaty ratification from practices, this study not only addresses the knowledge gap of how to fill empty promises, but also provides an innovative way of rethinking the role of foreign aid in development studies. Foreign aid plays an unexplored role in contributing to spread common norms such as human rights protection from North to South and not until recently did scholars begin to conceptualize aid's role in this way. Our research takes on Swiss' (2016b) call to examine aid's role in the World Society by examining its effects on specific sectors and through specific types of spending. In this, we demonstrate how aid plays a key role in providing the resources that encourage not only the spread of these models, but the extent to which they are implemented in more effective ways.

The case of human rights decoupling offers evidence that after a critical mass of aid is targeted at a country and its governance the gap between rhetoric and reality in human rights begins to narrow. Future research should examine whether this effect of aid on human rights decoupling is consistent across the many varieties of decoupling that manifest in different countries. Does aid improve decoupling more in countries which are actively abusing human rights than it does in countries experiencing decoupling only because they are resource-poor with ineffectual governments? Extending our analysis of the effect of aid on decoupling into other sectors of society and the economy would also be a fruitful research topic, enabling researchers to theorize further about the mechanisms and processes through which aid actively narrows decoupling gaps to begin to fill the empty promises made by governments the world over.

Notes

1. 1987 is the earliest year for which the World Bank country income category thresholds are available.
2. These treaties includes the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and two optional protocols; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and its optional protocols; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its optional protocol; the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) and its optional protocol; the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its three optional protocols; and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW); the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CPED); and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and its optional protocol.
3. The percentage of missing data caused by log-transformation is 4.66% (105 out of 2253 cases). We did not deal with zero values before log-transformation – such as adding a small constant value to each observation or imputing zero values with mean – because the missing data rate (4.66%) is relatively low and inconsequential (Dong and Peng 2013). Moreover, the interpretation of coefficients will be easier without extra transformations or imputation.
4. We want to thank the reviewer for suggesting this analytical strategy.
5. We also run random-effects models to include countries that never receive human rights aid for robustness check. The results are similar: human rights aid may reduce human rights decoupling, but the significance of this effect is not robust.

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