
Development aid, influence and governance: a road map

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Theme

As well as its impact on development, international aid can be a vehicle of regional and global influence and a tool of multilateral governance.

Summary

This paper synthesises the analysis and conclusions of three case studies focusing on international development cooperation as a lever for exerting regional and global influence.

The studies explore Germany and Spain's bilateral cooperation with Senegal, in the areas of migration and gender equality (Olivié, 2022); the configuration of the European institutions' development cooperation policy (Olivié & Santillán O'Shea, 2022); and the way in which decisions are reached in the COVAX mechanism and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GF) (Olivié & Santillán O'Shea, 2023).

The conclusion from these studies is that the aid-influence nexus emanates both from donors' assets (their economic size and their aid budget) and from their actions (their strategic vision and their capacity for coordination). The studies also lead to conclusions and recommendations for Spanish cooperation that can be summarised as: (1) the need to develop more precise strategies that are (2) aligned with the foundational missions of the organisations in which Spain participates and (3) aligned with the interests and values of partners with which it aspires to promote specific objectives; (4) the provision of greater technical capabilities that are better deployed; (5) greater coordination of the players involved in Spanish cooperation; (6) a more proactive attitude; and (7) a better use of its comparative advantages, such as its relatively good reputation as a donor.

Analysis

A series of studies have been conducted at the Elcano Royal Institute in recent years aimed at a better understanding of the relationship of influence that may arise in the context of international development cooperation. With the focus placed on the lessons that can be drawn for Spanish cooperation, this aid-influence nexus has been examined in three distinct scenarios.

The first involves bilateral aid and, specifically, a group of projects focusing on migration and gender equality in German and Spanish development cooperation with Senegal –a country given priority in Spanish cooperation and important in terms of its foreign agenda (Olivié, 2022)–.

We have also looked at supranational spaces, more specifically that of the EU, where the bulk of Spanish foreign activities are focused and through which almost half of its aid budget is channelled. If the EU is important for Spanish cooperation, Spain is important for European cooperation, having become the fourth-largest contributor to EU funds after the UK's withdrawal from the Union (Olivié & Santillán O'Shea, 2022).

The third case study explores the power dynamics in the world health system (Olivié & Santillán O'Shea, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the importance, and failings, of this system, strengthening the role of certain health institutions, such as the GF, and creating new ones, such as the COVAX mechanism for distributing vaccines. By analysing the aid-influence nexus in these two multilateral health institutions we have sought an enhanced understanding of the role Spain can play in a space where it is making a clear commitment, as shown, for instance, at the most recent GF replenishment conference.

The aim of this paper is to synthesise the results and conclusions obtained in these three studies, both in terms of the aid-influence nexus and with regard to the role of Spanish cooperation and the possibility of locating it more strategically in bilateral and multilateral development cooperation spaces. Therefore, the first section addresses the aid-influence relationship, highlighting the gaps in, and desirability of, analysis. Next, the main factors of influence implicit in aid are synthesised and, third and lastly, conclusions and recommendations are drawn for Spanish cooperation.

Aid and influence: the elephant in the room

In general terms, analysis of development cooperation from the international relations vantage point tends to assume that this relationship entails another relationship of power, in which the donor has the ability to influence the partner or recipient country. There is also a tendency for this capacity for influence to be taken as read, without exploring its extent, its nature, how it originates and how it is wielded (Langan, 2018).

Moreover, the academic (and activist) approach to power in international aid is normative and, in general terms, critical. From this standpoint, power is used by donors to exploit their national interests and interfere in the internal affairs of the partner country, even infringing the values implicit in development cooperation. While it is true that the exercise of power through aid has undoubtedly served (and serves) as a means of achieving political and economic objectives that exclusively benefit the donor, the relationship

between aid (whether bilateral or multilateral) and influence can be reassessed from other perspectives.

In a context of globalisation, there are many countries in the North and in the Global South that are broadening their foreign policy and strengthening their ties with the international community and with thematic and regional communities. Spain is no exception. Its significant presence in regional (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development –OECD–, the EU) and global decision-making bodies (the United Nations system, Bretton Woods institutions, G20) results from the culmination of a foreign policy strategy conceived during the emergence from autarky and the transition to democracy. It is, however, a foreign policy model that has fallen victim to its own success and has led to a situation today where Spain often plays the role of policy taker rather than the one it could play, that of policy maker (Börzel, 2002; Olivé, 2011; Molina, 2018 and 2021). Hence, there is scope for a more proactive attitude from Spain in the global development community as part of its international responsibility and as a means of promoting certain values (gender equality being a case in point) by means of bilateral or multilateral aid, particularly at a time when some of the main spheres of action, such as the EU, are reconfiguring themselves, in this case as a geopolitical actor.

It should also be borne in mind that after four decades of globalisation, the impact of what takes place beyond Spain's borders has increased at home. With the proliferation of global public goods (and evils) in a deeply connected international space, the construction of an agenda with internal consequences requires building alliances and rethinking the capacity for influence that development aid entails.

Factors of influence: a road map

It is therefore worth considering how the link between aid and influence or power, concepts that are here used indistinctly, manifests itself (Dahl & Stinebrickner, 2003; Meierding & Sigman, 2021). To generalise considerably, it may be said that the academic literature on foreign policy, international relations and development cooperation classifies the factors conducive to the wielding of influence into two large categories: assets and actions.

In other words, despite what the realist approach to international relations effectively suggests, it is not enough to 'have' (a large economy, population or territory, nuclear capabilities, a strategic geographical position or a large aid budget). Influence also involves 'doing' (forging alliances, convincing, designing strategies, taking advantage of windows of opportunity and coordinating actors), something that is in fact particularly important in bilateral cooperation development.

Drawing on previous studies and cross-checking with key informants, in a total of 47 semi-structured interviews conducted within the framework of this project, we were able to unpack this list of influence factors, which can also be viewed, as one of the interviewees suggested, as a sort of road map for donors interested in further capitalising on their presence in the international aid system (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Synthesis of influence factors in international development aid

Capabilities
<i>Economic</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Economic size of the donor 2. Total amount of ODA 3. Financial contribution to the country or organisation 4. Distribution of aid aligned to the country's or organisation's priorities
<i>Human and/or technical</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. National technical capability 6. Diplomatic and negotiation skills 7. Adaptation capability, including that of national institutions 8. Normative power, status and reputation
Proactivity
<i>Presence</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Presence and political lobby at a high level 10. Presence of national experts/civil servants/consultants 11. Presence on the ground
<i>Leadership</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Leadership of specific initiatives within the framework of supranational organisations 13. Hosting high-level meetings and replenishment conferences 14. Rotating G7/G20/EU presidencies
Political vision and coordination
<i>Identification and diagnosis</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 15. Capacity to identify and get involved in important spaces 16. Taking advantage of windows of opportunity 17. Identification and exploitation of the donor's added value
<i>Strategic vision</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 18. Explicit strategy... 19. that is clear, coordinated and shared nationally... 20. that includes a diplomatic vision that goes beyond aid 21. With a multisector focus (eg, security)
Alliances
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 22. Between heads of state or government and leaders of multilateral organisations 23. With governments of other countries 24. Among civil servants and at a technical level (including informal exchanges) 25. With the private sector 26. With civil society 27. With the media

Source: authors' compilation based on Banerjee & Rondinelli (2003); Greco & Matarazzo (2003); Quaglia (2004); Carbone (2007); Kickbusch *et al.*, (2007); Fabbrini & Piattoni (2008); Sridhar & Batniji (2008); Bulmer & Paterson (2010); Hill (2010); Vaquer i Fanés & Alberich (2010); Bindi (2011); Fielding (2011); Forsberg (2011); Lehne (2012); Harmer *et al.* (2013); Keohane (2013); Lundsgaarde (2013); García-Durán & Millet, (2014); Deych (2015); Irwin (2015); Kwon, Cook, & Kim (2015); Martens & Seitz (2015); Pavolini *et al.*, (2015); Woodcock (2015); Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias & Pickles (2016); De Bruyn (2016); Hix (2016); Menon & Salter (2016); Sandor (2016); Frantescu (2017); Herrick (2017); Janning & Zunneberg (2017); Korteweg (2017); Missoni (2017); Vives (2017); Anderson (2018); Castillejo *et al.* (2018); De Gruyter (2018); Dunin-Wasowicz (2018); Frowd (2018); Jung *et al.* (2018); Lim & Ferguson (2018); Sá Guimaraes & Almeida

(2018); Steurs *et al.*, (2018); Taylor (2018); Fanjul (2019); Janning & Möller (2019); McDonagh (2019); Otero Iglesias & Toygür (2019); Simón (2019); Simón *et al.* (2019); Steinberg (2019); Steingass (2019); Arteaga (2020); Büyüm *et al.* (2020); De Gruyter (2020); Erforth & Keijzer (2020); Gobierno Federal de Alemania (2020); Greubel (2020); Missoni & Tediosi (2020); Nguyen (2020); Smeets & Beach (2020); Szent-Iványi & Kugiel (2020); Wright *et al.* (2020); Zweers & van Loon (2020); Fenton & Chillag (2021); Ferrero (2021); Fillon (2021); Fondo Mundial (2021); Fuentenebro & Tapia (2021); Ayuso (2021); GAVI (2021); Kickbusch & Holzscheiter (2021); Lechien (2021); Meijer & Simón (2021); Olivie (2021); Parkes & Rappold (2021); Vilasanjuan (2021); Agarwal & Stark-DePass (2022); Agarwal *et al.* (2022); Dale (2022); Global Fund (2022a and 2022b); GAVI (2022); Hierro (2022); Krüger (2022); MOPAN (2022); Olivie & Santillán O'Shea (2022); Rodríguez *et al.* (2022); Salud por Derecho (2022); Steiner-Khamsi (2022); and Olivie & Santillán O'Shea (2023).

The interviews also served as a means of observing specific examples of how these influence factors are activated and eventually combined.

Using its bilateral *Migration for development* aid programme, German cooperation policy creates alliances with civil society actors, both in Germany and in Senegal (factor 26 in Figure 1), with which it shares a similar vision of development. In addition, some of these actors get drawn into the institutions within the framework of the cooperation project itself, as is the case of the 'reintegration scouts' (Olivie, 2022).

Within the EU sphere, various interviewees shared the opinion that Sweden's ability to include the gender issue in the European Commission's development cooperation policy is the result of a combination of factors: a holistic vision (factor 20), strategic definition (18), coordination (19), human resources (5 and 6) and the capacity for building coalitions with other member states (MS) (factors 22-24). Swedish cooperation is thus equipped with the ability to lead a relatively broad group of MS that might even include donors of a greater size.

The possibility of smaller donors –and by that token with lesser chances of wielding their influence by relying on their assets, as opposed to their actions– also becomes manifest in the case of the Visegrád Group of countries. According to the interviewees, this group has managed to mould the EU narrative on migration (particularly in the European Consensus on Development) using the alliance-building channel (factors 22-24) and taking advantage of windows of opportunity (16), something that incidentally requires appropriate knowledge of the way the institutions operate and the spaces where it is hoped influence will be exerted.

The various factors impinging on assets operate differently depending on the context in which they arise. Neither in the framework of the COVAX mechanism nor in the GF did it seem particularly important, in order to wield a degree of influence, to have a large economy (factor 1), population or even official development assistance (ODA) budget (2). The important factor in this case is the contribution the donor country makes to the specific institution, particularly in comparison to other partners' contributions (3). It is possible that the relatively minor importance of factors 1 and 2 compared to 3 is partly attributable to the closed-off nature of the COVAX and GF missions. In supranational spaces, by contrast, with broader missions and objectives, such as the EU, the size of the economy (factor 1) certainly was seen as an important factor for wielding influence.

Conclusion

The influence of Spanish cooperation

The three case studies confirm the conclusions drawn from earlier research into Spain's positioning in the international community. Spain is a donor with a presence in most of the major spaces for the governance of development, but it is not particularly influential. Moreover, the fact that the findings regarding Spain's role are so similar across such diverse cooperation spaces tends to confirm that the characteristics being detected are features applying to the whole of Spanish cooperation and not just some of its modalities.

Furthermore, Spain tends to favour a niche strategy, particularly in the EU. In other words it chooses a series of relatively circumscribed goals within the very wide mandate of the organisation (focusing on Latin America and the gender equality issue), which enables relatively effective action with limited resources, but on the downside may leave the donor excluded from the international conversation if an unexpected event emerges that upends the political agenda (such as the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) and the [war in Ukraine](#)). Various interviewees also suggested that it is an unusual strategy for a donor of such notable size –and thus equipped with resources– when compared with MS as a whole.

On the latter point, Spain lacks the assets, as a donor, that Germany and France command: it is not a member of the G7 and shares its seat at various international development organisations with other countries. But in specific contexts (such as the EU) it is not an insignificant donor and, secondly, while it is equipped with fewer influence factors in terms of assets, it has the potential of strengthening those related to actions.

It is also worth emphasising that Spanish cooperation possesses, by virtue of its inherent characteristics, considerable tools of influence: a significant role in technical cooperation, close dialogue with civil society organisations and liaison with institutions, compared with, for instance, the large infrastructure projects that other donors tend to favour.

Taking this situation as a starting point, specific recommendations emerge from these three case studies for each of the cooperation spaces (Olivié, 2022; Olivié & Santillán O'Shea, 2022; Olivié & Santillán O'Shea, 2023). These can be summarised as seven general recommendations for Spain in the donor community, several of which also coincide with earlier analyses into the strengths and weaknesses of Spanish cooperation (Cooperation Council, 2022). In other words, the same recommendations that tend to be made to improve the effectiveness of Spanish aid can also enhance Spain's influence as a donor.

The seven recommendations are:

- (1) It needs to devise a more concrete development cooperation strategy. Various interviewees mentioned Spain's emphasis on Latin America, which is not always accompanied by a clear explanation as to why and how it should focus more attention on the region.
- (2) With regard to the above, and particularly in supranational spaces, it is important that Spain's goals as a donor, while being specific and differentiated from those of other partners, are aligned with the foundational missions of the bodies in which they are being promoted. Taking the same example, the goals for Latin America pursued within the framework of the EU will be achieved more easily if they align with the EU's goals in the region.
- (3) The goals should also be aligned with the interests and values of partners with which Spain aspires to forge a shared agenda, precisely because of the importance alliances have as an influence factor. Continuing with the same example, in its defence of Latin America, Spain should reflect on the reasons why Germany, France, Poland, Portugal or Croatia should have an interest in promoting this relationship.
- (4) The lack of specificity in the strategies pursued in multilateral bodies may be linked to the lack of technical capabilities and/or of their deployment, which is why these studies suggest reinforcing such assets, which also constitute an influence factor.
- (5) Greater ability to exert influence requires more coordinated action from the various actors who take part in Spanish cooperation, including those who operate on the ground, in partner countries, and in Madrid, Brussels and Geneva.
- (6) Moreover, the presence of Spain in these spaces could benefit from greater proactivity when it comes to leading specific initiatives, not just simply signing up to them.
- (7) Various interviewees also mentioned the possibility of Spain taking advantage of its relatively good reputation, cultivated on the basis of its generally reliable conduct in the donor community and its technical capabilities in specific areas.

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