



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

INTERNATIONAL AID

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International aid is a form of voluntary assistance provided to foreign countries or populations. In the field of public administration, the concept of international aid generally refers to government development aid, which covers all the donations and preferential loans effected from the budget of a developed country on behalf of a developing country.

International aid is closely related to the concept of development assistance, even if the example of international aid to be cited is, as a rule, the Marshall Plan of 1947, whose objective was to rebuild a war-ravaged Europe (Dansereau, 2008). In step with the decolonization movement of the 1950s and 1960s, international aid was used to refer to various forms of support provided to countries that had recently acquired their independence or to developing countries in general.

The term of international aid is used to denote both government (or “official”) development assistance provided by countries or international organizations such as the World Bank and the assistance provided by private organizations, associations or charities (including foundations, NGOs, faith-based organizations, etc.). International aid can include assistance in the form of donations (financial or in kind), loans at preferential rates, or debt forgiveness. It also encompasses more specific concepts of development assistance, in terms of medium- or long-term structural assistance targeted at treating the causes of underdevelopment, as well as humanitarian aid or emergency assistance, which consist in providing short- or medium-term relief in response to the impacts of a crisis. Thus, international aid can refer to any number of things, such as:

- a literacy program funded by a NGO from direct donations from the public;
- a direct budget transfer from the government of country A to the government of country B;
- a contribution to a United Nations fund;
- a polio immunization campaign;
- a preferential loan with a five-year payment holiday;
- the supplying of sacks of grain;
- the hosting and assistance of refugee populations;
- the cancellation of public debt;
- the dispatching of cooperants.

On the other hand, person-to-person transfers of money and foreign direct investment are not considered to be international aid.

However numerous they may be, conceptions of international aid are first and foremost economic in nature (Rostow, 1962; Amin, 1973). A major correlation exists between trends in

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dominant economic thinking, on the one hand, and trends in international aid practices and the concept of development, on the other (Rist, 1996). Thus, the governments of developing countries, functioning syncretically with the Western governance practices specific to each era (Darbon, 2008), were thus first recipients of international aid in their capacity of drivers and planners of growth. However, in the aftermath of the oil shocks, followed by the debt crisis, the “all-State” philosophy came to be supplanted by the “less government” approach. Beginning with Reaganomics and continuing until the Washington Consensus, the State was perceived as a brake on development and, for this reason, its capacity to interfere or cause harm ought to be curtailed. At that point, international aid was redirected primarily to civil society organizations. In order to gain access to assistance, often provided in the form of loans, most governments had, in return, to accept or satisfy certain conditionalities (e.g., liberalization/opening of markets to competition, privatization of state-owned enterprises; scaling back of government investments; and downsizing of the public service) under what is referred to structural adjustment programs.

It is true that as a result of the adjustment programs, a number of major macroeconomic balances were restored. On the other hand, most developing countries were ultimately confronted with a serious degradation of public services, stagnating or declining social indicators, and persistent if not yet more acute poverty (Stiglitz, 2002). For their part, the industrialized countries have been discouraged by the meagre results obtained by international aid for approximately 30 years now. Likewise, they become increasingly preoccupied, no doubt since the end of the Cold War, with the actual results of aid over and beyond securing the loyalties of aid-receiving regimes. They thus initiated reflection on the effectiveness of assistance (OECD, 1996; World Bank, 1998), which led, in particular, to the adoption in 2000 of the Millennium Development Goals, a set of specific targets to be achieved by the international community by 2015. With a view to supplying the means required to meet these goals, donor countries agreed to significantly step up the volume of their aid on the occasion of the 2002 International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey.

At the present time, government development assistance actions tends to be defined in terms of results, in keeping with the trend observed among most public administrations (Guillaume, Dureau and Silvent, 2002; OECD, 2004; Secrétariat du Conseil du trésor, 2005). Rather characteristically, the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the would-be theoretical framework for managing development aid in the 21st century makes “managing for results” one of five main principles that should frame partnerships between aid donors and aid recipients. In addition, according to another principle set out in the Paris Declaration, recipient countries must take ownership and lead their own development policies. Thus, for each investment in an aid program (which must also support the strategic directions set by recipient countries), specific targeted outcomes have to be identified and evaluated in the course of implementation. The effectiveness of aid – and specifically the capacity of governments to satisfactorily manage aid, whether from the point of view of aid donors or recipients – now constitutes a vital component of reflection concerning international aid in public administration circles.

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