

THE FAR RIGHT AND OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT AID (ODA): NARRATIVES, POLICIES AND IMPACT

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Abstract: There has been an increasing level of far right activity in Ireland, particularly in protests against the siting of asylum seeker accommodation. An under-explored aspect of this emergent political activity has been its impact on overseas development aid (ODA). This article reviews a selected number of recent academic and policy articles on the rise of the far right and ODA with a view to understanding the nature and content of anti-ODA far right narratives. It considers counterstrategies that can be used by the ODA supporting community to combat far right anti-ODA narratives and policy changes. They include increased coordination between national and global issue campaigns, greater emphasis on positive rather than negative narratives based on alternative policy responses, and better messaging in these campaigns working closely with local affected communities to frame those messages. Ultimately, some of these recommendations could have implications for the political neutrality of non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Key words: Far Right; Overseas Development Aid; International Development.

Introduction

Ireland is one of the few remaining countries where the far right does not have an institutional presence, but there is increasing concern that this might change with far right involvement noted in protests against COVID-19 health measures during the pandemic and, more recently, against the siting of asylum seeker accommodation. One under-studied aspect of the rise of the far right is its impact on overseas development aid (ODA). In this article I approach this subject, seeking answers to the following questions: What are the ideological features of far right movements and parties that make it anti-ODA inclined? What is the nature and content of anti-ODA far right narratives? What impact do these narratives have on public opinion and on ODA policy? What counterstrategies can be used by the ODA supporting community to combat far right anti-ODA narratives and policy changes?

The article reviews a selected number of recent academic and policy articles on the theme and, hence, cannot pretend to answer these questions fully. Nonetheless, despite such limitations, it aims to contribute to an emerging debate on far right criticisms of overseas aid within the Irish ODA supporting community in the context of growing public concern around far right activity in Ireland. The article will first provide some definition and characteristics of the far right to help orient the discussion, putting particular emphasis on the characteristics of nativism and populism. It will then provide some answers to the questions outlined above. First it will develop the theme of the ideological background to far right distrust of ODA, locating this not just in nativism but also in populist anti-elitism. Then it will outline a few suggested policy impacts, noting that far right presence in public institutions, in or out of government, can have policy impacts on ODA. Such impacts are not confined to cuts in ODA, but also seek its reorientation to nationalistic goals and the control of immigration. Then a range of counterstrategies are suggested, drawing mostly from Galasso et al.'s (2017) detailed study for Oxfam on the relationship between the far right and ODA. Among their suggestions are increased coordination between national and global issue campaigns, greater emphasis on positive rather than negative narratives based on alternative policy responses, and better messaging in these campaigns working closely with locally affected communities to frame those messages. Ultimately, some of these recommendations could have implications for the political neutrality of NGOs.

Definitions

Before defining the far right, it is important to define the right. Cas Mudde (2019), arguably the most influential scholar in the field of far right studies, defines the right, following Bobbio (1996), as those parties and movements which, traditionally at least, view social inequalities, particularly class, gender and racial inequalities, as 'natural and positive, [which] should be either defended or left alone by the state' (Mudde, 2019: 7). Nonetheless, what divides the mainstream right from the far right is attitudes to (liberal) democracy. The mainstream right, 'such as conservatives and liberals/libertarians' (Ibid.), accepts liberal democracy, including its key values of tolerance and pluralism, as the sole means to compete for power. The far right, divided into the extreme right on the one hand and the radical right on the other, is 'hostile to liberal democracy' (Ibid.). The extreme

right in the tradition of fascism, reject democracy *tout court* while the radical right ‘accepts the essence of democracy, but opposes fundamental elements of liberal democracy, most notably minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers’ (Ibid.). Hence, the right in general defends social hierarchy, but is divided over strategies to achieve this: democratic compromise and consensus with non-right parties (mainstream right); or, rejection of compromise with non-right parties and movements but within a liberal democratic framework (radical right) or outside it (extreme right).

Mudde (2019) ascribes four key ideological characteristics to the far right: populism, nativism, authoritarianism, and familialism. By ‘populist’ he means a political grouping that:

“considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Ibid.: 7).

As the radical right accepts democracy, but not liberal democracy, he argues, then it is predominantly populist in the current context. Such a stance is questioned by others, arguing that the populist label obscures, for example, the far right’s historical links to fascism (see, for example: Rydgren 2018; Mammone, 2009; and Traverso, 2019 among others). Despite such reservations, most analyses on the far right use populism as an analytical frame, particularly as it emphasises the far right’s anti-elitism, which is a key theme used against ODA.

Importantly, for the purposes of this article, the far right is considered above all to be nativist. Nativism holds ‘that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native groups (the nation) and that non-native (or “alien”) elements, whether persons or ideas, are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state’ (Mudde, 2019: 27). The ultimate goal for the radical right is an ethnocracy, that is ‘a democracy in which citizenship is based on ethnicity’ (Ibid.: 26). As a result, ‘aliens’ must either ‘assimilate’ or be expelled from the country and the ‘national culture’ must be protected from threats, among which immigration is the most important. In both extreme and radical rights

(and increasingly in centrist politics on both right and left) immigration is seen as problematic at best, or fundamentally inoperable at worst. Such dislike of immigration is particularly salient against people of Muslim background and Islamophobia is a characteristic of many far right parties and movements, an attitude which is increasingly being expressed in mainstream centre-right politics. This emphasis on nativism leads to a nationalist, if not isolationist, approach to foreign policy which negatively affects ODA.

The far right is also identified as authoritarian in that they believe in ‘a strictly ordered society, in which infringements on authority are to be punished severely’ (Mudde, 2019: 29). Social problems (alcoholism, drug addiction, crime, violence etc.) need to be dealt with as law and order issues. The origins of these problems are often blamed on ‘elites’, specifically supposed ‘left-wing’ teachers and academics ‘who corrupt youth with “cultural Marxism” and other “perverse” ideas’ (Ibid.: 35), such as gender, sexual diversity and multiculturalism. These processes of ‘indoctrination’, alongside immigration, are seen to weaken the nation, which is equated with ethnicity and the nuclear family. The authoritarian aspect has implications also for foreign policy as it suggests punitive rather than cooperative solutions to problems whose origins are identified as stemming from overseas, such as immigration.

Finally, familialism is, according to Kemper (cited by Mudde, 2019: 148):

“a form of biopolitics which views the traditional family as the foundation of the nation and subjugates individual reproductive and self-determination rights [of women in particular] to the normative demands of the reproduction of the nation”.

This can translate into sexism and traditional binary views of gender, and feminism and feminists as well as LGBT+ groups are viewed very negatively as a result (Ibid.: 151). While this can vary among the far right in different areas of Europe, with some western and northern European, radical right parties nominally accepting gender and sexual equality achievements, most would not advocate further legislation in these areas, arguing that ‘equality’ has been

achieved. Such attitudes can translate into socially regressive re-designing of ODA priorities, such as, for example, the former United States' (US) President Donald J. Trump's use of the Global Gag Rule (Taylor and Norris, 2017), which withdraws USAID support from any organisation construed as supporting abortion.

ODA in far right discourse

As seen above, the four basic identifying characteristics of the far right are potentially inimical to ODA as a policy frame, or certain aspects of ODA policy, such as reproductive rights. Galasso et al. (2017: 9), for example, find that the far right uses 'anti-elite narratives, anti-globalization narratives, and anti-immigration/refugee narratives' in service of anti-ODA narratives. Nativism is at the root of far right questioning of foreign aid, as it is a frame used 'in the othering of the have-nots of the world and stressing a preference for taking care of the in-group first' (Burcu Bayram and Thomson, 2022: 5). Burcu Bayram and Thomson (Ibid.: 2) find, for example, that the far right argues against foreign aid, characterising it as a cosmopolitan policy that prioritises 'foreigners' at the expense of 'patriots', in the context of scarce resources. In such a context, 'the people' wish to prioritise helping their own poor and needy citizens rather than those of foreign countries (Ibid.: 4). In this narrative, ODA is conceived as a policy driven by elites seeking to protect their own priorities or by elites in recipient countries who disproportionately benefit from ODA (Ibid.).

Heinrich et al. (2021) argue that far right actors exploit the absence of the usual policy feedback loop in foreign aid discourse. They argue that even those who approve of ODA have little way of knowing whether aid is effective or not. In an age of increasing lack of trust between ruler and ruled, this problem becomes particularly acute, a fact that the far right is happy to exploit. Such discursive tactics result in mainstream parties promising to reduce aid to seek re-election (Ibid.: 1047). Hence, they find a direct correlation between increases in anti-elitist and nativist moods in a donor country, and declining ODA spending levels (Ibid.: 1048). Suzuki (2023: 6) goes further and finds a link between the reduction of aid and the establishment's failure to control immigration. In such a context, arguments emerge to use ODA funding to augment border control or

other domestic welfare programmes for the people deemed most in need of government protection.

ODA policy changes by governments that have far right members or are influenced by the far right

As noted above, the far right can have direct impact on ODA policy whether they are in power or not. Hammerschmidt, Meyer and Pintsch (2022), for example, in their study of 25 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries between 1990-2016 found that foreign aid commitments are likely to decrease when populist radical right parties have a higher share in the legislature and even more so when they are part of the executive. Burcu Bayram and Thomson (2022: 3) point out that the anti-foreign aid stance of far right populists moves mainstream conservatives further to the right on the issue. Indeed, Galasso et al. (2017: 8) argue that far right influence is more due to this indirect influence over the mainstream than being part of government; the latter being the exception rather than the rule.

“[T]heir influence on government comes from: their effect on public opinion; their ability to push other parties further right; their influence on government to develop more authoritarian policies on issues like migration; and their broader influence on the political systems of Europe” (Ibid.: 8).

Heinrich et al. (2021: 1057) find that:

“...anti-elitist and nativist attitudes are systematically associated with negative attitudes toward aid...regardless of whether the government is run by populists. It is through changes in mass preferences that anti-elitism and nativism can affect donor countries’ aid spending”.

Burcu Bayram and Thomson (2022: 2) point to ostensibly centre-right administrations’ anti-ODA policies as proof of this, such as that of the Trump administration’s cutting ODA, Boris Johnson, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, redirecting ODA funds to support national foreign policy priorities rather than poverty reduction, and the use of fiscal conservatism

narratives in Australia to reduce ODA. As Burcu Bayram and Thomson (2022: 2) observe with regard to such policy moves, the far right, ‘unlike traditional fiscal conservatives...do not simply wish to reduce aid spending; they seek to redefine the purpose of aid and development co-operation to serve their countries’ economic and political interests’. Hence, they point out that, ‘Populists will often set out to use foreign aid to limit the numbers of immigrants and refugees, sometimes going as far as to include plans to resettle them back to their countries of origin’ (Ibid.). Hammerschmidt, Meyer and Pintsch (2022: 480) additionally argue that such rhetoric may not only result in reductions in ODA but also reduced inclination ‘towards multilateralism in terms of payments to and memberships in international organizations or being less cooperative in finding solutions to common problems’. This far right focus on domestic issues means that they are ‘less compromising in foreign policies when these do not entail an immediate gain for a country’ (Ibid.: 482). Hence, hostility to ODA found among the far right and, indeed among some mainstream conservative parties is part of a wider rejection of cooperative multilateralism to solve common global governance problems, a stance which in turn has impacted on ODA policies, such as supporting climate change initiatives.

Counter-strategies

Despite the negative of the far right impact on ODA, Burcu Bayram and Thomson (2022) are optimistic that the impact of far right anti-ODA rhetoric on public opinion is limited. They argue that while it can lead to a decrease in support for ODA, this effect is conditioned by ‘whether people think populist leaders stand up for the little guy or scapegoat out-groups’ (Ibid.: 1). This suggests that one part of counter-strategising is to ensure that people think the latter rather than the former. Galasso et al. (2017) make a number of recommendations to help ensure that this is the case. They suggest, for example, that ODA supporting communities develop ‘campaigns pointing to the interconnectedness of causes and solutions across political, economic, social and cultural fields at global, regional and other scales’ (Ibid.: 54). In other words, the interconnectedness of these problems at a scalar level from the local to the global should be emphasised.

They additionally suggest greater coordination between global and nationally based narratives and campaigns, emphasising positive benefits and

outcomes and avoiding a 'politics of blame' (Ibid.: 51). In parallel to such campaigns, positive, non-adversarial, and propositional visions could be explored, such as 'those represented in work on alternative economic paradigms' (Ibid.: 54). Equally, there is a need to defend 'civil society advocacy and action spaces' at home and abroad, also threatened by the far right, using cross-sectoral collective campaigns, including government and voluntary sectors (Ibid.: 52). Other coordinated and cross-cutting campaigns could be 'on inequality, pointing to change to particular drivers of this (i.e. corporate tax rates); migration and global displacement', using 'more nuanced and locally relevant ways to engage diverse audiences rather than a global, one-size-fits-all approach' (Ibid.: 54). Additionally, they recommend making 'better use of social media to communicate and develop appropriate language consulting with local communities to refine messaging' (Ibid.).

Galasso et al (2017) also point out that civil society is not a homogenous space but requires review to understand how right-wing discourses take hold. Part of the answer to this question can be found in Bob (2012: 7), in which he argues that 'global civil society is not a harmonious field of like-minded NGOs [but] a contentious arena riven by fundamental differences criss-crossing national and international borders'. For every network of institutions and individuals pursuing progressive causes, Bob (2012) argues, there is a counter-network seeking to consistently undermine this work. In this respect, ODA is no different, and research should be done to help understand such networks, including their origins, objectives, strategies and impact. Such findings, however, raise questions about the political nature of NGO campaigns, particularly if there is a need to provide positive alternatives to neoliberal forms of globalisation (Galasso et al, 2017: 50).

Conclusions

This article sought to outline some key issues and challenges for ODA in a political context increasingly influenced by far right organisations and ideology. First, it defined and characterised the right and the far right, identifying key features which are threatening to ODA, policy impacts of such threats, and some suggested counterstrategies that could be used by ODA supporting communities. In this discussion it noted the far right's rejection of key liberal democratic

features, such as pluralism and protection of minorities, if not democracy itself, and the influence and impact of far right nativism and populism in creating a hostile environment for ODA. This crystallizes in a far right rejection of public support for non-nationals, both abroad and, in some cases, at home (the 'out' group) prioritising state support for nationals (the 'in' group). Anti-elite, anti-globalisation, and anti-migrant/refugee narratives are enlisted to support this viewpoint as well as a supposed need for fiscal conservatism. Policy impacts can be cuts to ODA, re-orientation of ODA to more explicit nationalistic aims, and the rejection of multilateralism. The far right can orient policy in these directions even without achieving power through a process of 'mainstreaming', i.e. adoption of such narratives and policies by centre-right and even centre-left parties in the hope of heading off the electoral threat of the far right.

In order to counter-strategise against this threat from the far right, ODA supporting communities can reorient their own narratives to support national objectives by pointing to a confluence of interest between the global and the national in heading off common threats. They can offer explicit policy prescriptions which point to positive outcomes rather than simple problematisation of the issues. Such messaging, however, needs to be informed by and constructed with local communities, especially those most vulnerable to far right targeting. These counterstrategies, however, may entail explicit politicisation of ODA supporting NGOs which may leave them vulnerable to far right attacks and state disapproval, a risky occurrence if such NGOs are dependent on state funding and/or cooperation. Further research may be required to assess how such NGOs have strategised against the far right in other jurisdictions, including how they managed such risks and how the far right formed coalitions and marshalled their own anti-ODA strategies.

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