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## Foreign aid as a tool of soft power beyond altruism in donor-recipient relations

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### Abstract

This study examined the actual intentions of a donor country when setting out to give foreign aid, with a particular focus on interests beyond humanitarian altruism. Using the PRISMA framework, the research gathered peer-reviewed publications published between 2000 and 2025 to investigate aid motivations in the empirical, theoretical and case study contexts. The data was analysed thematically using qualitative synthesis. The results clearly indicate robust support of the realist assumptions of international relations: donor nations regularly provide their aid with financial self-interests in mind, military and geostrategic interests, post-colonial power, and the spread of the influence of soft power. Humanitarian discourse is used as a mask mounted to hide more diplomatic interests. Although altruism exists, it is usually second place or selectively imposed. The review comes to a conclusion that foreign aid is a very politicised statecraft. The implications of the findings are that multilateral governance needs to be transformed in the way of international ethics, higher levels of transparency, recipient autonomy and independent reasoning. Future research directions include comparative studies of South-South cooperation and the long-term consequences of aid conditionality and gender aspects of aid allocations.

**Keywords:** Foreign aid, official development assistance, realism, donor countries, altruism, self-interests

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Background to the study

The concept of foreign aid in international relations has been the focus of scholars from several professions. Todaro and Smith (2003: 647) <sup>[62]</sup> defined foreign aid as “any flow of capital to low-development countries that meets the following criteria: the reason for giving aid should not be commercial, and the interest rate and repayment period should be less stringent than if the loan was given for commercial reasons.” This conforms to the explanation by Perkins *et al.* (2006: 521) <sup>[53]</sup>, who stated that “foreign aid consists of financial flows, technical assistance, and commodities given by one country to another, either as grants or as subsidised loans”. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines foreign aid as Official Development Assistance (ODA), which is governmental aid that directly aims at and promotes the overall well-being and economic development of the emerging countries (OECD, 2023) <sup>[51]</sup>. Of these definitions, the definition by the OECD is most aligned with this research, as it highlights the purpose for foreign aid, which this research aims to debate.

After World War II, the Western countries started giving foreign aid in terms of relevant resources and skills since they held the notion that other countries were less developed (Sternehall, 2018) <sup>[59]</sup>. In 2022, the leading donors of foreign aid are as follows: United States (\$12,328.5 million), Germany (\$3,041.5 million), European Commission (\$2,033.5 million), United Kingdom (\$920.9 million), and Canada (\$796.3 million) (Statista, 2023) <sup>[58]</sup>. Altruism is viewed as a selfless act of self-fulfilment, which puts into consideration the welfare of other humans without any sign of counterpart payment/compensation (Mathew *et al.*, 2016) <sup>[45]</sup>. Nevertheless, according to the article by Bandyopadhyay and Vermann (2013) <sup>[5]</sup>, in addition to altruistic motives, strategic interests have always been relevant. In a similar vein, Bermeo (2017) <sup>[9]</sup> contends that the goal of providing foreign aid has always been to benefit the donor countries rather than out of true compassion. Thus, it is not satisfactory to

merely view the internationally coordinated transfer of money, products, or services from one nation or international organisation to another as the selfless act solely for the advancement of the receiving country or its citizens.

## 1.2 Problem statement

Despite the bulk of research to elucidate the distributions of foreign aid and its effectiveness, little seems to have been done to understand the incentives and motivation of the advanced states in coming out with their foreign aid. As stated by Sen (2018) <sup>[56]</sup>, to define the foreign aid policy of the donors, it is crucial to define the real motives of the donors. Therefore, this study is based on this discussion as it aims at proving that donor nations barely give aid for selfless reasons but through the will to have a rational gain of social, political, or economic benefits in the countries receiving assistance. Consequently, the study contends that foreign aid is largely applied as a tool of advancing economic and political interests. This perspective is supported by the statement of Williams (2023) <sup>[69]</sup> that foreign countries provide their assistance by pretending they are enhancing welfare through alleviating suffering caused by disasters, the driving motives are actually to sustain their security, achieve diplomatic goals, promote exports and aid in exploiting the natural resource deposits of the recipients. To augment the case regarding this argument, the study critically examined the reason why advanced nations give aid, dotting on the theory of realism in making the arguments that the provision of foreign aid by the donor states to the recipient states is not based on advancing the economy of recipient states but as a camouflage to advancing the donors' national interests.

## 1.3 Research question

- What are the true motives driving foreign aid from donor to recipient countries?

## 1.4 Aim and objectives

- To systematically review literature on donor countries' motivations for providing foreign aid.
- To evaluate the evidence against the assumptions of altruism in foreign aid provision.
- To thematically analyse recurring patterns of donor interests across geopolitical contexts.

## 1.5 Significance of the study

The research is of great importance both academically and on the policy front. It informs and gives value to important literature on international relations issues, as, through the decomposition of existing evidence, it challenges the prevailing discourse that altruism motivates foreign aid. This claim leads into further concern of the prevailing scholarship, critiquing standard models of donor-recipient relationships and broadens the theoretical rhetoric behind realism, constructivism and post-colonial critiques of international relations. Policy wise, the results will provide critical inferences into international governance, accountability, and moral rectitude in the distribution of aid. To aid recipient countries, the study provides policymakers and negotiators with information that can be used to further interpret donor behaviour, to put them in a better bargaining position, as well as to be able to formulate approaches where foreign aid can be related to local concerns and can

be related to sustainable development. Overall, this research will heighten accountability, fairness, and strategic consciousness in the international aid framework.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research design

This research employs a systematic review method, guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Moher *et al.*, 2009) <sup>[48]</sup>. A systematic literature review is a type of literature review that critically examines and analyses the findings and conclusions of existing studies on a subject matter (Snyder, 2019) <sup>[57]</sup>. The choice of this research design is based on the fact that it would effectively synthesise the existing evidence on underlying motives by which foreign aid is given. The PRISMA framework enables methodological transparency, replicability, and rigour in searching, selecting, evaluating, and analysing the current relevant literature on the motives of donors in the foreign aid context.

### 2.2 Eligibility criteria (inclusion & exclusion)

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review were defined to make sure that the relevance and quality of included studies is preserved. The inclusion criteria include the following: peer-reviewed journals published from 2000 to 2025, written in English, and pointing out the reasons for foreign aid. Included studies had to be empirical, case studies, and theoretical papers based on the realistic or comparable theories that challenge the interests of donors. On the other hand, studies that solely focus on the components of aid efficiency without focusing on the motivators were excluded. Grey literature (like blogs, editorials, and policy briefs), non-English publications and sources that did not analyse donor motives were also excluded. This strategy allowed the review to be more focused on the strategic, political and ideological processes of aid allocation, as opposed to operational or humanitarian ones.

### 2.3 Search strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was used to retrieve relevant research in various scholarly databases. The databases to be searched were Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis Online, ProQuest, Google Scholar, OECD iLibrary, United Nations digital library and EBSCOhost, which cover international relations, development studies and political economy. The search used key terms and Boolean operators such as:

- “Foreign aid” AND “donor motivation”
- “Realism” AND “international relations” AND “foreign aid”
- “Foreign aid” AND “national interest” OR “economic interest” OR “military strategy”
- “Altruism vs self-interest” AND “development assistance”

These terminologies were iteratively refined to capture all theoretical and empirical inclinations of donor motivations in various parts of the world.

### 2.4 Screening and selection process

The study adhered to the PRISMA flowchart model to inform screening and selection, which follows four procedures: identification, screening, eligibility, and

inclusion (Page *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[52]</sup>. Following the elimination of duplicates, the issue of relevant titles and abstracts was evaluated. Thereafter, two independent reviewers read full texts of eligible articles to maintain consistency and decrease the bias. Resolution of discrepancies was definitely achieved via discussion, which made the selection objective.

## 2.5 Quality appraisal

To estimate the quality and reliability of the included studies, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist was used (CASP, 2018) <sup>[15]</sup>. This instrument enabled qualitative assessment of the aim and methodological strength of the respective studies, validity of the data presented, transparency of theoretical applications, ethical reasons and the adequacy of the study to the objectives of the review. Research studies that scored lower in the area of methodological transparency or that did not adequately consider the motivations of donors were left out. This quality appraisal reinforced the credibility of the synthesis and facilitated the derivation of justifiable and policy-relevant themes.

## 2.6 Data extraction

A data extraction table was prepared to analyse and organise the information of included studies systematically. The most important items of data were author(s) and year of publication, geographic location of interest, study design, donor and recipient contexts, stated and implied motivations, and major findings/conclusions. This framework made it easy to compare multiple geopolitical and theoretical settings, showing a pattern of similarity and differences in the conceptualisation and implementation of the motives of foreign aid in the literature.

## 2.7 Data analysis

The review used the thematic synthesis method to analyse the data extracted. Coding and categorising were done manually with the aid of the NVivo software. Data were organised in the form of thematic categories by repeatedly reading and inductively coding each of them. The prevailing themes that were raised were economic self-interest, military strategy and diplomacy, post-colonial legacy, resource exploitation, and cultural or religious influence. These themes suggest a wholesome approach to explain how the signification of foreign aid usually caters the strategic interest of donor nations other than the mainly humanitarian or developmental aspects (Lancaster, 2007; Berthlemy, 2006) <sup>[41, 10]</sup>.

## 3. Theoretical framework

### 3.1 Realism in international relations

The guiding theory upon which this research is anchored is realism, and numerous evidence-based studies have been presented in the literature that support this theory. In the Second World War, the realism International Relation (IR) theory rose to fame and importance as it tried to help understand how and why war is so rampant in the international community (Nyarko, 2023) <sup>[50]</sup>. Hans J. Morgenthau extended the theory of realism to the form of a comprehensive philosophy of international relations (Morgenthau, 1962) <sup>[49]</sup>. In the theory of realism, national affairs are handled by the public officials to enable them to endure in a constantly competitive environment, the major player in international relations is the state, and the national interest of the nation-state officials is being pursued

reasonably (Antunes & Camisã, 2018) <sup>[2]</sup>. Basically, the theory of realism is founded on the book by Niccolò Machiavelli referred to as "In the Prince" (1532), where it states that the decision-makers of the state possess the characteristics of a fox (deception) and a lion (power), and they are the key tools in the manipulation of international affairs. Therefore, every action of governments in the administrative sphere is aimed at preserving, expanding or demonstrating power supremacy (Antunes & Camisã, 2018) <sup>[2]</sup>.

However, realism has a number of limitations, including the overemphasis of the state as a unit, ignoring the other actors and aspects of the state, and failure to draw the relationship between the sustainability of a state and global problems (Antunes & Camisã, 2018) <sup>[2]</sup>. The liberal viewpoint contends that foreign aid is given to promote the socioeconomic development of recipient nations (altruism), in contrast to the realist viewpoint that sees it as donors' purely self-serving tactic to influence Cold War policies (Sen, 2018) <sup>[56]</sup>. Interestingly, unlike liberalism, realism ignores the mechanisms according to which institutions, activities, and economic interactions restrict the powers of states and diminish them (Meiser, 2017) <sup>[47]</sup>. Accordingly, this study fits into the realism school of thought that grants existence to the fact that the impulse behind foreign aid by the donor nations is usually a self-interest of the donor nations, which in most cases is presented to the recipient nations as an altruistic effort to mislead the advocate nations and the world in general. Most of the earlier studies on the reason to offer foreign aid, including Alesina and Dollar (2000) <sup>[1]</sup>, are consistent with Morgenthau's concept of realism that foreign aid is reduced to the play of broader power dynamics of states, which is ensconced in geopolitics and economic self-interest.

### 3.2 Contrasting theories

Unlike realism, liberalism has a more optimistic perspective on international relations, which is intrinsic in the fact that cooperation, interdependence, and international institutions are the key elements in creating peace and progress (Keohane & Nye, 1977) <sup>[37]</sup>. The liberal theorists assert that the donor countries do not offer aid to only support self-interest, but they want to introduce democracy, human rights, world stability and economic development in the developing world (Riddell, 2007) <sup>[55]</sup>. The constructivist researchers argue that motivations of the donors depend on domestic values, past connections and ideational commitments instead of being based on frozen power calculations (Wendt, 1999) <sup>[67]</sup>. For example, ex-colonial powers like France and UK might give aid to former colonies because they feel the historical responsibility, whereas Nordic countries tend to base their aid on the national identity of world ethical consciences (Van der Veen, 2011) <sup>[63]</sup>. In this perspective, decisions about aid are ingrained within accounts of solidarity, or justice, or reputation status in the arena of the international stage. Even though the views of liberalism and constructivism provide valuable normative and ideational information, the orientation of this study is realism with considerations that motivations can be multi-layered and situation-specific.

### 3.3 Conceptual model

In an effort to put theoretical knowledge into practice, this study uses a conceptual framework that places the donor interest and recipient need on a continuum. This model is an



adaptation to the typology of aid motives developed by Morgenthau (1962) <sup>[49]</sup> and was subsequently extended by McKinley and Little (1979) <sup>[46]</sup>, who hypothesised that aid distributions can be attributed to recipient need (such as poverty or governance) or donor interest (such as trade, security, or diplomacy). With the help of this "donor interest vs. recipient needs" paradigm (McKinley & Little, 1979) <sup>[46]</sup>, now the conventional model in this study of foreign aid motives, this study can perform a multi-dimensional analysis of aid motivations to untangle the rhetorical altruism and distinguish it from the possible political or economic motivations. Organising the analysis on the basis of this spectrum of donor interest versus recipient need, the research offers a consistent way of making sense of the complicated, often contradictory, rationalisation processes involved with foreign aid policy.

#### 4. Findings and thematic analysis

##### 4.1 Overview of included studies

A total of 45 studies were included in the review. These studies span several countries across the globe, utilising a variety of methodology. The extracted data from the included studies are illustrated in Appendix C.

##### 4.2 Theme 1: Economic interests

The empirical data of the aid allocation literature indicate that all the donors grant more aid to their trading partners. Alesina and Dollar (2000) <sup>[1]</sup> discovered that the openness of trade forecasts greater quantities of aid. Further investigation into this link revealed that aid for all donors was significantly correlated with (delayed) trade openness (Dreher *et al.*, 2022; Hoeffler & Outram, 2011; Hoeffler & Sterck, 2022) <sup>[20, 33, 34]</sup>. Similarly, Apodaca (2017) <sup>[3]</sup> notes that the practice of "tying aid" is a sign of the business drive underlying foreign aid, with the aim being to open up markets for the donor's financial benefit. This was confirmed by Riddell (2014) <sup>[54]</sup>, who affirmed that as much as half the overall official development assistance in the world is tied. Berthlemy (2006) <sup>[10]</sup> also demonstrated that the characteristics of tied aid, where the recipient of aid was obliged to purchase goods in the donor country, is an important feature among donors.

Different forms of trade flows have also been taken into account by researchers. Younas (2008) <sup>[71]</sup> demonstrates that nations give more aid to those receiving countries that import commodities on which they have higher comparative advantages in the production. Steverson (2019) <sup>[60]</sup> states that, alongside pursuing tactical and political interests, donors also employ aid as an instrument of enhancing their prestige in the hope that the receiving countries will buy more of their products back. In different settings, Bayramoglu *et al.* (2023) <sup>[7]</sup> and Weiler *et al.* (2018) <sup>[65]</sup> examine climate assistance transfers and find that donor exports have a notably beneficial impact on climate aid.

Beyond bilateral aid, scholars have examined how donors sway multilateral development organisations' aid distribution for their own financial benefit (Claessens *et al.*, 2009; Malik & Stone, 2017; Dreher *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[16, 44, 21]</sup>. In particular, Dreher *et al.* (2019) <sup>[21]</sup> demonstrate that donor governments exert influence on the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the World Bank Group's private-sector lending organisation, so that it directs funding to private enterprises within their nations. However, according to the findings of Doucouliagos and Paldam (2008) <sup>[19]</sup> and Barthel *et al.* (2014) <sup>[6]</sup>, beneficiary nations receive help in return for

promoting imports and removing trade restrictions. Additionally, Apodaca (2017) <sup>[3]</sup> asserts that foreign aid can ensure that the donor nation has access to vital raw materials like minerals, oil, and others. According to Bandyopadhyay and Vermann's (2013) <sup>[5]</sup> study, strategically motivated aid was linked to improved exports to recipients, countermeasures against terrorist groups' mobilisation in those nations, and the geopolitical ties between donors and recipients. In their research, Browne (2006: 8) <sup>[13]</sup> also discovered that the distribution of developmental help does not correspond with the beneficiaries' developmental requirements but rather is based on "factors of commercial, geopolitical, strategic/security, or historical importance to donors."

##### 4.3 Theme 2: Military and geostrategic objectives

It was also discovered that the donor country exploited foreign aid to expand its military reach by gaining access to and authority over the domestic and foreign affairs of other states. For example, according to Tarnoff and Lawson (2016: 1) <sup>[61]</sup>, the US government views overseas assistance as an "essential instrument of U.S. foreign policy which has increasingly been associated with national security policy". Apodaca (2017) <sup>[3]</sup> asserts that foreign aid is mostly used to further geostrategic objectives, protect the right to build and maintain military bases abroad, strengthen alliances, or maintain the authority of allied governments. According to Woods' (2005) analysis of U.S. aid after 9/11, access to vital military footholds and counterterrorism goals were strongly linked to help to nations like Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In a study by Faye and Niehaus (2012) <sup>[26]</sup>, it was discovered that a closer alignment of the recipient country administration with a donor leads to additional bilateral aid being given in an election year, and on the other hand, less aid is given to an administration that is not aligned very well with the donor. Moreover, Bandyopadhyay and Vermann (2013) <sup>[5]</sup> point out that big donors tend to offer more assistance to former colonies and the states with which they have common interests, such as states that vote similarly in the UN. Additional research demonstrates that aid is utilised to purchase or reward friends' and geopolitically significant nations' support (Alesina & Dollar, 2000; Carter & Stone, 2015; Dreher *et al.*, 2008; Dreher *et al.*, 2022; Kuziemko & Werker, 2006) <sup>[1, 22, 23, 14, 40]</sup>.

##### 4.4 Theme 3: Post-colonial influence and soft power

Foreign aid was also found to be a potential source of "soft power." Although the concept of soft power can be operationalised variably, one of them is to determine whether aid can secure hearts and minds of the people on behalf of the donor. Van der Veen (2011) <sup>[63]</sup> identified that Francophone nations have been given more aid and cultural outreach assistance than analogously needy Anglophone states, which implies that the aid is being utilised in several identity creation and loyalty creation efforts. Alesina and Dollar (2000: 33) <sup>[1]</sup> noted that "an inefficient, economically closed, mismanaged, non-democratic former colony that is politically friendly to its former coloniser receives more foreign aid than another country with similar levels of poverty and a superior policy stance but without a past as a colony." In support of this, Becker (2020) <sup>[8]</sup> asserts that colonial rulers have historically provided greater aid to former colonies, pointing out that nations like France, Portugal, Spain, and the UK give substantial aid to their former colonies. This is predicated on the idea that

assistance from former colonists can help preserve or restore colonial regions of power and solidify political ties. Additionally, donors may provide help with the goal of strengthening support for regimes that are friendly. Several studies demonstrate that aid has a favourable impact on incumbency support (Blair *et al.*, 2022; Briggs, 2019; Cruz & Schneider, 2017; Isaksson & Kotsadam, 2020; Kersting & Kilby, 2021; Knutsen & Kotsadam, 2020) <sup>[11, 12, 17, 36, 38, 39]</sup>. Additionally, it has been demonstrated that aid has an impact on elections and leader survival in general (Wright, 2009; Dietrich *et al.*, 2018; Baldwin & Winters, 2020; Wellner *et al.*, 2023) <sup>[70, 18, 4, 66]</sup>. According to Licht (2010) <sup>[42]</sup>, aid helps fledgling democratic leaders stay in power but hurts them as rivalry and discontent increase; on the other hand, autocratic leaders can use aid to solidify their positions over time. Briggs (2019) <sup>[12]</sup>, using a spatial difference-in-differences approach in three African nations, finds that receiving aid reduces support for incumbent presidents, possibly via eroding confidence in the incumbent. In conclusion, there are significant political repercussions from aid.

#### 4.5 Theme 4: Humanitarianism as a mask

Another significant theme from the reviewed studies is that foreign aid is masked as humanitarian support, whereas there are ulterior donor motives behind it. Duffield (2007) <sup>[24]</sup> has popularised the term strategic humanitarianism, which claims that the donor countries formulate the visions not only to access the crisis-hit and disaster-stricken regions but also to divert attention to more strategic implications. Similarly, the report of Harmer and Macrae (2004) <sup>[32]</sup>, based on their analysis of humanitarian response activities, revealed that aid sent to a country like Haiti or Sudan was often flanked by hidden ulterior motives like security or access to resources, rather than urgent humanitarian needs. In addition, Hagmann and Reyntjens (2016) <sup>[30]</sup> noted that, in corrupt or politically unstable environments, humanitarian assistance frequently went up regardless of demand, but to preserve donor leverage, bids on long-term infrastructure boiled down, evincing a concealing effect.

### 5. Discussion

#### 5.1 Synthesis of findings

The collective empirical evidence overwhelmingly supports the realist argument that donors, as they use foreign aid, are motivated most of the time by self-interest, especially for economic gain, geostrategic balance, and post-colonial power. The reviewed studies all reveal that donor states, irrespective of their ideological alliances and other developmental obligations, tend to exercise their self-interest systematically in giving out aid. This confirms the principal claims expressed by Morgenthau (1962) <sup>[49]</sup> and further elaborated by Lancaster (2007) <sup>[41]</sup>, both of whom hold that the aid has frequently been utilised as an instrument of power preference. For instance, studies such as Alesina and Dollar (2000) <sup>[1]</sup>, Hoeffler and Outram (2011) <sup>[33]</sup>, and Hoeffler and Sterck (2022) <sup>[34]</sup> showed that aid channels are driven by trade partners and the countries that provide traders with some business advantages. Tied aid, as Apodaca (2017) <sup>[3]</sup>, Riddell (2014) <sup>[54]</sup> and Berthlemy (2006) <sup>[10]</sup> discuss, serves as further evidence that aid is one of the tools used to facilitate the export of donor products, the opening of their markets and the acquisition of their resources. This transactional approach is illustrated by the particular situations of uranium interests of France in Niger

and the economic-military affinity of the United States to the Philippines (Edwards, 2019; France Diplomacy, 2022) <sup>[25, 27]</sup>.

On the same note, geostrategic application of aid is duly documented. Studies by Tarnoff and Lawson (2016) <sup>[61]</sup>, Woods (2005), and Faye and Niehaus (2012) <sup>[26]</sup> point out how aid is utilised to build military coalitions, strategic positions, and control the results of elections in favour of donor-friendly authorities. It corresponds with a larger realist argument that foreign aid is an extremely vital part of national security policy (Bandyopadhyay & Vermann, 2013; Carter & Stone, 2015) <sup>[5, 14]</sup>. Moreover, the finding that aid is used to manipulate the voting trends within the United Nations by influencing the preferences of other members, as revealed by Kuziemko and Werker (2006) <sup>[40]</sup> and Dreher *et al.* (2008, 2022) <sup>[23, 22]</sup>, is another indicator that aid is used as an instrument of power to achieve international support. The results also confirm the presence of long-term effects of post-colonial relationships in determining the aid flows, which sustains soft power interests and cultural and political imperialism of the donor countries (Van der Veen, 2011; Alesina & Dollar, 2000; Becker, 2020) <sup>[63, 2, 8]</sup>. This is where the literature on dependency theory (Maizels & Nissanke, 1984) is relevant since it runs on an illustration of how aid is employed to perpetuate dependency (economic and political) that is favourable to the donor.

The presentation of humanitarian pretences over strategic motives is a repeated sequence as well. The theoretical projections of Duffield (2007) <sup>[24]</sup> concerning the idea of "strategic humanitarianism" find practical support in studies by Harmer and Macrae (2004) <sup>[32]</sup>, Hagmann and Reyntjens (2016) <sup>[30]</sup>, and Lopez (2015) that in sum indicate that humanitarian aid is often used in politically problematic areas not because of some alleged good intentions but as the tool of cementing power or gaining access to resources. This reasoned movable use of humanitarian aid makes it troublesome to portray the image of aid as being a totally good practice. Despite the predominant trend, which corresponds to the assumptions made by the realists, it has also become evident with the help of evidence that not all flows of aid are always strictly self-serving. Certain decisions of aid seem to take place out of pure humanitarian interest, especially when given by lesser-donor countries that have less strategic interest (Nordic nations). The variation in the motivation of donors would mean that even in a system based on realism, there are islands of altruism, though as exceptions and not as a rule.

#### 5.2 Contradictions and divergences

Although research gravitates towards realist motivations, there are many conflicting points and situational peculiarities, which do not support one perspective. To begin with, the studies by Younas (2008) <sup>[71]</sup>, Weiler *et al.* (2018) <sup>[65]</sup>, and Bayramoglu *et al.* (2023) <sup>[7]</sup> indicate that the pattern of aid allocation is one that is indicative of mixed intentions and so they are economic, environmental, and developmental in nature. In addition to that, another complexity is added by the example of China; although there are consistent patterns identified between assistance and trading patterns by the OECD donors, Hoeffler and Sterck (2022) <sup>[34]</sup> established that there is no consistent pattern of assistance and trade at all by China, especially in Africa. In the same vein, Blair *et al.* (2022) <sup>[11]</sup> and Wellner *et al.* (2023) <sup>[66]</sup> produce mixed evidence on the soft power impact of Chinese aid, as the impact of Chinese projects on

recipient support was shown to be negative in certain studies, whereas in others, the impact on approval generates insignificant gains. Such conflicting results indicate that the motivations of donors are not quite as homogeneous as may be expected by the realist orthodoxy.

Also, certain authors observe that the effects of aid on the domestic politics of recipient states are not quite direct. Briggs (2019) <sup>[12]</sup>, Cruz and Schneider (2017) <sup>[17]</sup>, and Isaksson and Kotsadam (2020) <sup>[36]</sup> present pieces of evidence that aid supports as well as weakens incumbent regimes given the modality, how people perceive it, and the nature of local governance. Licht (2010) <sup>[42]</sup> discovered that under circumstances of increasing dissatisfaction, aid would stabilise emerging democratic leaders but, on the contrary, destabilise the more established ones. The literature also makes the case that strategic priorities that used to characterise aid flows during the Cold War but are not the same thing in the post-9/11 era due to the rise of counterterrorism and security alliances, climate change, gender equality, and governance reform (Woods, 2005; Tarnoff & Lawson, 2016; Doucouliagos & Paldam, 2008) <sup>[61, 19]</sup>. Such complications show that though donors can be strategic in their intentions, the results can not always be predicted. This evokes some ethical issues depending on how effective and fair aid conditionalities are.

### 5.3 Implications for theory

The results of the review indicate that the realist theory is highly valid and increasingly applicable in international relations, especially in terms of the foreign aid policy. The power, security, and self-interest focus of realism has shown that it can be a good explanatory tool in the provision of aid by aid-giving countries and how such countries package their aid deals in attaining national interests. The review, however, finds strictly realist limitations as well. Mixed motives disclosed by Van der Veen (2011) <sup>[63]</sup> and the climate aid research (Bayramoglu *et al.*, 2023; Weiler *et al.*, 2018) <sup>[7, 65]</sup> reveal that the topic of foreign aid can be associated with a tool of statecraft to the full extent. Theories of liberalism and constructivism that focus on norms, cooperation and identity still have some explanatory power especially in regard to non-traditional donor aid, soft

power and public diplomacy.

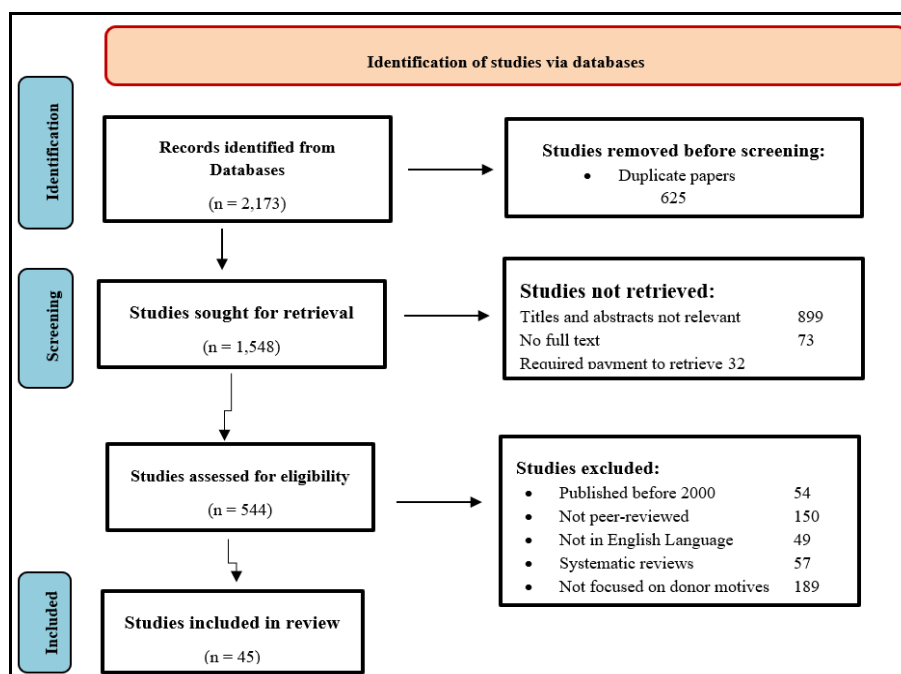
Furthermore, altruistic pockets of smaller donors like Nordic countries and the emergence of issue-based aid like climate finance and funding on gender equality issues show that the aid system is changing in other ways besides the one that could have been described through realism. The growing intervention of international organisations and civil society in the delivery of aid also dents the realist assumption that state-centric interests prevail across the whole aid architecture. Therefore, although realism provides the most pertinent prism, the dynamics of aid require a more pluralist theoretical framework that involves aspects of liberalism and constructivism, in particular when examining emerging donors, multilateral sources of providing aid, and norm-based mandates.

### 5.4 Implications for practice and policy

The implications of the findings are both practical and policy-sound, especially to both the donating and the receiving nations and to the system of global governance as a whole. Firstly, aid flows are strategic and therefore portray issues regarding the fairness and success of the existing aid regime. When donor interests are the main motivating factor for providing aid, the potential danger lurks that the resources will fail to benefit the most vulnerable group of people and solve the most crucial developmental issues (Browne, 2006; Apodaca, 2017) <sup>[13, 3]</sup>. Furthermore, the instrumentalisation of human suffering into geopolitically driven humanitarian agendas, mentioned by Duffield (2007) <sup>[24]</sup> and Hagmann and Reyntjens (2016) <sup>[30]</sup>, brings the question of ethics into perspective. Lastly, the evidence implies that the negative implications of donor-driven aid can be reduced through a recipient-centric approach to aid where local communities, governments, and civil society organisations have a higher role in defining their priorities regarding the aid. This strategy supports the ideals of the Paris Declaration of 2005 on Aid Effectiveness, which emphasises ownership, alignment, and accountability.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: PRISMA flow diagram



**Appendix B: CASP checklist**

Author (Year)	Was there a clear statement of the aims?	Is the methodology appropriate?	Was the research design suitable to address the aims?	Was the recruitment strategy appropriate?	Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Is there a clear statement of findings?	How valuable is the research?
Berthélemy (2006) <sup>[10]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Steverson (2019) <sup>[60]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Weiler <i>et al.</i> (2018) <sup>[65]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Barthel <i>et al.</i> (2014) <sup>[6]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bayramoglu <i>et al.</i> (2023) <sup>[7]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	No	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dreher <i>et al.</i> (2019) <sup>[21]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	No	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Malik & Stone (2017) <sup>[44]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	No	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Doucoulagos & Paldam (2008) <sup>[19]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Can't tell	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Edwards (2019) <sup>[25]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
France Diplomacy (2022) <sup>[27]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Browne (2006) <sup>[13]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Claessens <i>et al.</i> (2009) <sup>[16]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tarnoff & Lawson (2016) <sup>[61]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Goldsmith (2001) <sup>[29]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fuchs <i>et al.</i> (2014) <sup>[28]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hagmann & Reyntjens (2016) <sup>[30]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Duffield (2007) <sup>[24]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Harmer & Macrae (2004) <sup>[32]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kuziemko & Werker (2006) <sup>[40]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dreher <i>et al.</i> (2008) <sup>[23]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dreher <i>et al.</i> (2022) <sup>[22]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Carter & Stone (2015) <sup>[14]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Becker (2020) <sup>[8]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Blair <i>et al.</i> (2022) <sup>[11]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wellner <i>et al.</i> (2023) <sup>[66]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cruz & Schneider (2017) <sup>[17]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	No	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Knutsen & Kotsadam (2020) <sup>[39]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kersting & Kilby (2021) <sup>[38]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Isaksson & Kotsadam (2020) <sup>[36]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Briggs (2019) <sup>[12]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Baldwin & Winters (2020) <sup>[4]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dietrich <i>et al.</i> (2018) <sup>[18]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Licht (2010) <sup>[42]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wright (2009) <sup>[70]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Alesina & Dollar (2000) <sup>[2]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Van Der Veen (2011) <sup>[63]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dreher <i>et al.</i> (2022) <sup>[22]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Faye & Niehaus (2012) <sup>[26]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	No	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hoeffler & Outram (2011) <sup>[33]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hoeffler & Sterck (2022) <sup>[34]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Younas (2008) <sup>[71]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Apodaca (2017) <sup>[3]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	No	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Riddell (2014) <sup>[54]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bandyopadhyay & Vermann (2013) <sup>[5]</sup>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes



**Appendix C: Data extraction table**

Author (s) and year of publication	Geographic location of interest	Study design	Donor and recipient contexts	Stated and implied motivations	Major findings/conclusions
Berthélemy (2006) <sup>[10]</sup>	Global (10 bilateral donors)	Quantitative econometric analysis	OECD donors; various recipients	Economic interest, strategic/political interests	Donors do not behave uniformly; some prioritize recipient needs while others focus on self-interest.
Steverson (2019) <sup>[60]</sup>	Japan	Case study design	Japan (donor); Global South (recipients)	Neorealist motivations—security and trade	Japan uses aid to expand geopolitical influence, aligning with realist theory.
Weiler <i>et al.</i> (2018) <sup>[65]</sup>	Climate-vulnerable countries	Regression analysis	Various OECD donors; climate-vulnerable recipients	Governance, vulnerability, donor interests	Aid is not always directed to the most vulnerable but influenced by donor interests.
Barthel <i>et al.</i> (2014) <sup>[6]</sup>	Global (donor countries)	Spatial econometric study	OECD donors	Competition for export markets	Donor aid allocations are affected by trade competition among donors.
Bayramoglu <i>et al.</i> (2023) <sup>[7]</sup>	Global	Empirical analysis	Multiple bilateral donors	Trade-related aid motives	Aid for climate adaptation often supports donor trade interests.
Dreher <i>et al.</i> (2019) <sup>[21]</sup>	IFC global projects	Quantitative analysis	IFC (World Bank); private sector	Corporate influence	IFC lending is influenced by political economy, with donor-country corporate interests playing a role.
Malik & Stone (2017) <sup>[44]</sup>	World Bank global operations	Quantitative political economy study	U.S. (donor influence in WB)	Corporate lobbying, political leverage	U.S. companies influence World Bank loans, confirming strategic use of aid.
Doucouliaqos & Paldam (2008) <sup>[19]</sup>	Global	Meta-analysis	Broad donor-recipient scope	Effectiveness of aid	Aid has modest impact on growth; effectiveness highly variable.
Edwards (2019) <sup>[25]</sup>	Philippines	Historical case review	U.S. donor; Philippines recipient	Strategic regional ally	U.S. aid aligned with diplomatic and security interests.
France Diplomacy (2022) <sup>[27]</sup>	Niger	Policy brief	France-Niger	Development cooperation, strategic ties	Aid is linked to economic and security partnerships.
Claessens <i>et al.</i> (2009) <sup>[16]</sup>	Global	Quantitative econometric study	Multilateral and bilateral donors	Shift in criteria over time, including strategic and political factors	Aid allocation criteria are evolving, increasingly influenced by donors' strategic interests.
Tarnoff & Lawson (2016) <sup>[61]</sup>	United States	Descriptive policy analysis	U.S. foreign aid programs	Strategic, economic, and humanitarian motives	U.S. aid policy reflects a balance between domestic politics and global strategic goals.
Goldsmith (2001) <sup>[29]</sup>	Africa	Conceptual and empirical analysis	Western donors; African recipients	State-building and control	Aid influences statehood and governance structures, sometimes reinforcing weak institutions.
Fuchs <i>et al.</i> (2014) <sup>[28]</sup>	Global	Literature review	Various donors	Generosity, strategic interests	Donor generosity often correlates with political or economic self-interest.
Hagmann & Reyntjens (Eds.) (2016) <sup>[30]</sup>	Africa	Thematic edited volume	Western donors; authoritarian regimes in Africa	Stability, access, geopolitical interests	Aid often supports authoritarian regimes for stability, undermining democratic goals.
Duffield (2007) <sup>[24]</sup>	Global	Theoretical analysis	Donor states; conflict-affected areas	Security-development nexus	Aid is part of broader strategies for global governance and security control.
Harmer & Macrae (2004) <sup>[32]</sup>	Global (protracted crisis zones)	Policy review	Humanitarian donors	Evolving aid frameworks	Aid increasingly shaped by political agendas in long-term crises.
Kuziemko & Werker (2006) <sup>[40]</sup>	United Nations	Regression analysis	U.N. Security Council and bilateral donors	Vote-buying, strategic leverage	Aid increases when countries gain UNSC seats—suggests transactional motives.
Dreher <i>et al.</i> (2008) <sup>[23]</sup>	UNGA member countries	Disaggregated statistical analysis	U.S. donor; UN General Assembly states	Vote-buying	U.S. aid correlates with strategic voting patterns at the UN.
Dreher <i>et al.</i> (2022) <sup>[20]</sup>	Global	Econometric study	Donors and multilateral recipients	Delegation of controversial aid to multilaterals	Bilateral donors use multilateral channels to mask controversial aid goals (“dirty-work” hypothesis).
Carter & Stone (2015) <sup>[14]</sup>	United Nations	Quantitative statistical analysis	U.S. as donor; UNGA recipients	Vote-buying, promoting democracy	U.S. tends to reward democracies and use aid to influence multilateral votes.
Becker (2020) <sup>[8]</sup>	Global (historical and contemporary)	Policy analysis	Post-colonial donors and former colonies	Colonial legacy, policy diffusion	Historical legacies strongly influence aid priorities and patterns.
Blair <i>et al.</i> (2022) <sup>[11]</sup>	Africa	Mixed-methods (quantitative and case study)	China and U.S. in Africa	Soft power, geopolitical rivalry	Aid is used to expand spheres of influence amid U.S.-China competition.
Wellner <i>et al.</i> (2023) <sup>[66]</sup>	Global (with focus on China)	Experimental survey + geospatial analysis	China as donor; Global South recipients	Image-building, public diplomacy	Chinese aid improves perceptions of China in recipient countries.



Cruz & Schneider (2017) <sup>[17]</sup>	Latin America	Statistical analysis	Multiple donors and recipient politicians	Political credit-claiming	Aid used by incumbents for political gain, not just development.
Knutsen & Kotsadam (2020) <sup>[39]</sup>	Sub-Saharan Africa	Quantitative sub-national analysis	Bilateral donors	Incumbency advantage, elite capture	Aid disproportionately benefits politically connected regions.
Kersting & Kilby (2021) <sup>[38]</sup>	World Bank member states	Institutional analysis	U.S. and World Bank projects	Domestic politics shaping influence	U.S. domestic politics affect World Bank loan distribution.
Isaksson & Kotsadam (2020) <sup>[36]</sup>	Africa	Case-based comparative analysis	China and African nations	Commercial, political leverage	Chinese aid tends to follow economic interests, with distinct local impacts.
Briggs (2019) <sup>[12]</sup>	Africa	Field-based survey and statistical analysis	African recipients	Electoral effects of aid	Aid can reduce incumbent support when citizens perceive misuse.
Baldwin & Winters (2020) <sup>[4]</sup>	Uganda	Experimental survey	U.S. aid in Uganda	Government legitimacy, transparency	Perceived legitimacy depends on aid type and donor attribution.
Dietrich <i>et al.</i> (2018) <sup>[18]</sup>	Bangladesh	Experimental survey	Various donors, Bangladeshi government	Foreign policy alignment, regime legitimization	Aid affects citizens' perception of government legitimacy depending on visibility and attribution.
Licht (2010) <sup>[42]</sup>	Global sample	Statistical analysis	Multilateral/bilateral donors	Regime survival, elite support	Aid positively impacts leader survival, especially in authoritarian settings.
Wright (2009) <sup>[70]</sup>	Global (authoritarian regimes)	Regression analysis	Authoritarian aid recipients	Democratization pressure, political reform	Aid can promote democratization if conditional and well-targeted.
Alesina & Dollar (2000) <sup>[2]</sup>	Global (cross-country)	Econometric analysis	OECD donors, global recipients	Political alliance, colonial ties, economic interests	Aid allocation reflects political and strategic interests rather than poverty reduction.
Van der Veen (2011) <sup>[63]</sup>	Global	Theoretical synthesis and empirical testing	Donor states and broad recipient regions	Ideas vs. interests debate	Ideas influence aid alongside interests; motivations are complex and donor-dependent.
Dreher <i>et al.</i> (2022) <sup>[22]</sup>	China and global recipients	Mixed-methods (quantitative and geospatial)	China and Belt & Road partners	Geostrategic leverage, economic expansion	Chinese aid prioritizes strategic infrastructure over social needs.
Faye & Niehaus (2012) <sup>[26]</sup>	Global	Time-series econometric analysis	OECD donors	Electoral cycles, political opportunism	Aid flows peak around donor elections, suggesting political manipulation.
Hoefler & Outram (2011) <sup>[33]</sup>	Global	Literature review and econometric synthesis	Multiple donors and regions	Recipient need, governance quality, donor interests	Allocation shaped by a mix of need, merit, and donor self-interest.
Hoefler & Sterck (2022) <sup>[34]</sup>	Africa and Asia (mostly)	Empirical regression	China vs. Western donors	Distinctive aid model, state-to-state relations	Chinese aid is less conditional, more infrastructure-driven, and less democratic in its expectations.
Younas (2008) <sup>[71]</sup>	Global	Panel data analysis	Bilateral donor-recipient dyads	Trade incentives vs. altruism	Trade benefits more predictive of aid allocation than humanitarian need.
Apodaca (2017) <sup>[3]</sup>	Global	Theoretical literature review	Various international donors	Strategic foreign policy tool	Aid is often used to pursue geopolitical goals rather than purely humanitarian objectives.
Riddell (2014) <sup>[54]</sup>	Global	Policy analysis and review	OECD donors and developing countries	Effectiveness and accountability	Donor interests often overshadow development outcomes; need for more transparent aid mechanisms.
Bandyopadhyay & Vermann (2013) <sup>[5]</sup>	Global	Economic review article	Donor governments (e.g., US, EU)	Economic and political returns	Aid is influenced more by strategic donor benefits than recipient needs.
Browne, S. (2006) <sup>[13]</sup>	Global, with focus on developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America	Policy analysis and qualitative case studies	Multilateral and bilateral donors; recipient governments in the Global South	Donor interests in policy influence, governance shaping, and economic liberalisation	Donors often hinder recipient autonomy by using aid as leverage to impose economic and political agendas. This undermines local ownership and limits the long-term effectiveness of aid.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 6.1 Conclusion

This review has critically assessed the motives behind foreign aid allocation amongst donor countries, challenging the notion peddled by so many that of altruism in foreign aid. Drawing from a large body of empirical research conducted over the last 25 years, the empirical evidence demonstrates the position that the national self-interest is the main driver of foreign aid, agreeing with the idealist paradigm view of international relations. According to the study's findings, the donor agenda is driven by economic self-preservation, military strategy, post colonial influence

and soft power projection. Thus, the review shows that aid as a foreign policy tool wielded by donor countries has more or less the same purpose as trade, diplomacy, or defence with the view to advancing their national interests, attaining strategic positions, and impacting domestic policies of targeted destinations.

However, the findings demonstrate that motivations are not univocal. Differences in terms of donor characteristics, recipient features, past relations and geopolitical flows indicate that use of aid can show a mixture of interests and normative obligations. Other donors (especially Scandinavians) have different patterns that may be more

altruistic or development-orientated but are still exceptions. To conclude, it is fair to say that the realist paradigm still presents itself as a very powerful descriptive framework in relation to explaining the logic of foreign aid, but the impacts of liberal and constructivist ideals cannot be discounted completely. This dominance of strategic interest in aid policy poses a doubt on how orthodox international development cooperation is conducted and puts forward the case of international development cooperation having a closer look at how foreign aid is formulated, dispersed, and consumed.

## 6.2 Recommendations

Considering the evidence depicting the situation with interest-based aid allocation, this study provides the following policy recommendations to restore the right balance between the major concepts of ethics, transparency, and fairness of the international aid systems.

### 1) Formulate ethical global standards for aid practice

The world stands in great need of some internationally accepted ethical standards that delimit what should be accepted as sound aid practice and what goes beyond the line to be defined as coercive behaviour and exploitative practices. This could be led by such institutions as the OECD's DAC, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the new donor discussion groups like the BRICS Bank. These standards are expected to provide a clear distinction between humanitarian and strategic/military aid; condemn inordinate aid conditionalities in relation to unrelated donor goals; and foster normative commitments to human rights, gender equality and climatic sustenance.

### 2) Promote transparency and enforceable donor conditionality

The transparency programs of aid, such as the International Aid Transparency Initiative, are helpful but are not yet binding and are inconsistent. What is needed is a stronger binding international system that succeeds in requiring complete disclosure of aid contracts, delivery chains, and conditionalities; demand that donor governments disclose not only their financial flows but also their planned political/economic outturns of aid; and enable outside auditing agencies to judge whether aid disbursement is compatible with expressed developmental objectives. This will not only enhance accountability by the people but also assist recipient states, civil society and the scholars to witness how the aid flows are being used or channelled maliciously.

### 3) Enhance the recipient autonomy and institutional capacity

Developing countries have to be given the mandate to determine their development agendas. These include investing in local transparency organisations that will improve planning, negotiation and monitoring capacities; encouraging South-South partnerships and sharing of knowledge with the aim that sources of aid are diversified and dependency on aid is reduced; and facilitating the inclusion of local civil society in the policy-making process, coupled with the engagement of the vulnerable populations in the determination of development priorities. Through capacity-building, recipient nations will be in a much better

position to avoid exploitative giving relationships, bargain on an equal basis with them, and ensure that usage of aid funds reflects proper national development plans.

### 4) Separate strategic aid from humanitarian aid

There should be no selectivity when dispensing humanitarian aid, except on a need basis, without political/commercial attachments. Multilateral agencies and donor countries are recommended to apply firewalls that alter the budget of development aid with the budget of foreign policy and defence. This might involve the establishment of autonomous humanitarian organisations that act in terms of internationally accepted rules (like the Red Cross Code of Conduct) and the exclusion of military forces to provide or direct humanitarian aid except in stringent circumstances of exception. This kind of demarcation would allow rebuilding an image of humanitarian aid and protect it against politicisation.

### 5) Enhance multilateral governance structures

The governance mechanism of key multilateral organisations, like the World Bank, IMF, and United Nations, should also be reformed to make them not necessarily dominated by influential donor states. Some of the structural changes may comprise reforming voting rights to limit donor hegemony, enhancing the representation of the recipient states and civil society in the decision-making organs, and insisting on the donor disclosing the instances of lobbying/conditioned influence on multilateral lending agencies. It is through the reforming of governance over multilateral aid that the balance of power can be altered out of the concerns of elite donors and into the concerns of shared global development.

## 6.3 Suggestions for future research

The review highlights the gaps in knowledge that are worth looking at in future research. Firstly, the comparative analysis of the motives of aid within the South-South cooperation is relevant. The available literature centres on the Global North conventional donors that overlooked the rising impact of the emerging donors such as China, India, Turkey, and Brazil. Further studies ought to examine whether these donors are following the same pattern of interest-based aid of the OECD nations or whether they are indeed following a distinct HDP trend.

Also, conditionalities on aid have to be investigated in terms of the impact on recipient economies in longitudinal research. Although there are studies where the widespread nature of the conditional aid has been identified, far fewer have undergone its long-term effects. An analysis of the impact of aid-related conditions on such aspects of the economic growth, institutional quality, sustainability of debts, and freedom of political sovereignty over time would give much-needed light on whether the conditions turn out to be beneficial or detrimental to the development of the recipient countries.

A gendered analysis of donor priorities over aid allocation must also be done. Aid measures usually resemble gender-neutral approaches, though they can, in a real sense, support or promote prevailing inequalities or fail to accommodate gender needs. Further research ought to explore to what extent aid is disbursed to programs that support empowerment of women, maternal health and gender-based violence and whether this is done in earnest to support

equality or is a strategic move with selfish intentions.

### 7. Declaration of conflicting interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### 8. Funding statement

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### 9. Data availability statement

No additional data used in this research that has not been included in the study.

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