PAKISTAN INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS

Opening the Black Box: Managing the Aid Policy Process in Pakistan

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February 2017

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ISLAMABAD
2017**

C O N T E N T S

ABSTRACT

Scholars have suggested the need to open the 'black box' of the aid delivery system to gain a deeper understanding of how the aid policy process works in practice. This research responds to this gap in the literature by exploring how donors and the Pakistan government interact in game and network settings to manage foreign aid in the complex aid policy network. Using Klijn and Koppenjan's (2016) process analysis, this research explores specific network management strategies actors employ to govern the aid policy process, and facilitate game and network interactions.

The findings indicate that connecting strategies were the most prevalent strategies in managing the aid policy process in Pakistan. In strategic donor-government interactions, incentives, research, and informality not only promote collaboration and cooperation, but also enable actors to mitigate stagnation and influence policy decisions. New insights from this research are valuable in improving existing knowledge about how the aid community interacts and manages the aid policy process on the ground; which would eventually contribute to the understanding of aid effectiveness.

JEL Classification: D70, D85, F35, H83, O20

Keywords: Foreign Aid, Policy Networks, Network Management, Policy Process, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Foreign aid has attracted much attention in academic and policy circles since donors started providing aid to developing countries. Extensive research and analytical work has been carried out on foreign aid in the last six decades. However, the aid literature has rarely considered the practical working of the aid policy process—specifically, how aid decisions are managed and transformed into action, the 'black box' notion—in an aid recipient country such as that of Pakistan [Khan (2016)]. In that sense, apart from examining aid outcomes (or effectiveness), a thorough qualitative analysis is equally important to understand how actors interact to manage the aid policy process in a complex aid policy network.

Scholars, such as Arndt, *et al*. (2011), Bourguignon and Sundberg (2007), Gibson, *et al*. (2005), and Nissanke (2010) have suggested the need to open the 'black box' of the aid delivery system to gain a deeper understanding of how the aid policy process work in practice. Further, the existing aid literature rarely examines the role and influence of policy networks on aid policy processes in general. Even less is known about how policy networks and processes operate in Pakistan, and how multiple actors interact and bargain in game and network settings. This research responds to this gap in the literature by seeking to open the 'black box' of the aid delivery system in Pakistan.

The objective of this paper is to explore how in practice donors and the Pakistan government interact to manage foreign aid in the aid policy network.[1] To meet the research objective, the central question of this study is: what network management strategies actors employ to manage the aid policy process in Pakistan? Keeping this in view, this research uses the process analysis[2] [Klijn and Koppenjan (2016)] to explore specific network management strategies [Ayres and Stafford (2014); Klijn, *et al*. (2010); Koppenjan and Klijn (2004)] donors and the Pakistan government employ to govern the aid policy process, and facilitate game and network interactions, including around the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).[3]

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[1]Khan, F. J. (2016) presents a detailed overview of the aid policy network in Pakistan.

[2]Process analysis (also called game analysis) is a part of the actor, process and institutional (or network) analysis; see Klijn and Koppenjan (2016) for details.

[3]This paper is a product of the PhD dissertation on Inside foreign aid: donor-government interactions and the aid policy network in Pakistan, submitted to the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol, UK (2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The 'black box' is a part of any system model or theory that assumes its operation without explaining how exactly that part of the system processes or translates inputs into outputs [Birkland (2014)]. Scholars have suggested the need to open the 'black box' to gain a deeper understanding of how the aid delivery process works in practice. Gibson, *et al.* (2005, p. 18) suggest "if we are to explain the outcomes of development aid, we need strong theoretical and empirical studies that, ideally, address many links in the aid chain." Bourguignon and Sundberg (2007) describe the complex causal chain linking external aid to final outcomes as a 'black box' and emphasise the need to open it to gain a deeper understanding of aid effectiveness. They identify three types of links in the 'black box': (a) donors to policymakers (financial and technical assistance, and policy conditionality); (b) policymakers to policies (governance and institutional capacity); and (c) policies to outcomes (knowledge). Arndt *et al.* (2011) argue that the aid literature is mainly focused on the aid-growth link, whereas the causal chain through which aid affects development outcomes, including growth, has received much less attention. Arndt, *et al.* (2011, p. 1) states "If causal links are poorly understood, then channelling aid toward [the MDGs] may be misguided."

Nissanke (2010) argues that such in-depth analysis of the causal chain cannot be effectively conducted through simple reduced-form cross-country regressions at the aggregate level, which have been a popular analytical tool in empirical research on the impact of aid on economic development. Presenting the aid effectiveness debate, Nissanke (2010, p. 83-84) states "The main question raised in conventional studies on aid effectiveness is how donors can influence, by using aid as leverage, the quality of policy and institutions to maximise its impact. Hence, the focus of these studies is the beginning and the end of the causal chain, rather than understanding what happens inside the 'black box'." Temple (2010, p. 4501) argues "As things stand, one can spend a long time reading the best economics journals without finding much of interest on how successful institutions work in practice. That is a loss for the discipline. Rather more fundamentally, it is a loss for the millions whose destinies are linked, for better or worse, to the effectiveness of foreign aid." This study seeks to bridge this gap in the literature.

Keeping this in view, this research focuses on exploring policy processes surrounding foreign aid by providing an in-depth, qualitative, rich description of donor-government interactions in the aid policy network. Doing so, this work seeks to complement the extensive work undertaken to evaluate inputs and outputs or outcomes (aid effectiveness) using quantitative methods or econometric models. It does so by exploring the 'black box' of the aid delivery system in the complex aid policy network in Pakistan.

Theoretical Directions

This study takes a network management[4] approach to explore the different 'network management strategies' actors employ to manage the aid policy process in Pakistan. Without adequate network management strategies it is impossible to achieve effective outcomes in complex interaction processes [Klijn, *et al.* (2010)]. Overton, *et al.* (2013) argue for a network analysis of foreign aid that may lead us to reconceptualise aid relationships and understand complex interactions and linkages. The assumption is, therefore, that if actors operating in the aid policy network want to achieve their organisational or broader network objectives, they need to consciously and actively manage their network environment. This is the first study to explore in detail the specific network management strategies being adopted by actors in the aid policy network in Pakistan.

Broadly, two types of network management strategies are identified in the policy network literature. *Process management strategies* are focused on guiding and facilitating game and network interactions [Ayres and Stafford (2014); Kickert, *et al.* (1997); Klijn, *et al.* (2010); Koppenjan and Klijn (2004)], while *institutional design strategies* seek to alter the institutional characteristics of the network by changing the network composition and/or the formal rules that govern interactions and outcomes [Klijn and Koppenjan (2000)]. This research concentrates solely on the 'process management strategies' adopted by the actors – of the core action arena, includes the executives, key federal and provincial ministries, and official donors – in their attempt to manage foreign aid in Pakistan. In this context, this research explores connecting strategies, exploring contents, and process agreements.

- *Connecting strategies* are required in order to start the game. These involve identifying and incentivising actors which are crucial to achieving the broader objectives of the network (Ayres and Stafford, 2014). Specifically, this study explores connecting strategies which include: initiating new interactions; resource mobilisation; helping partners to reach an agreement or overcome tensions through mediation; overcoming potential obstacles to collaboration; and, creating incentives for cooperation.
- *Exploring content* is necessary to clarify the goals and perceptions of actors and try to invest time and resources in developing solutions that create opportunities for actors. These strategies are particularly important for managing the difficulties in determining the precise

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[4]The deliberate attempt to govern processes in networks is called *network management*. This approach aims to initiate, guide and facilitate interaction processes between actors, create incentives and opportunities to participate, change institutional arrangements for better coordination, and create new content by exploring ideas.

nature of the policy problem (Ayres and Stafford, 2014). Specifically, this study explores strategies which include: searching for goal congruency; and, managing and collecting research.

- *Process agreements* involve strategies that set the rules for interaction and regulate the behaviour of actors. Specifically, this study explores strategies of process agreements which include: managing stagnation; removing and/or limiting the possibility of conflict between actors (through informality); and conflicting strategies (multiple objectives).

Most of the policy networks literature tends to focus on Western societies [Enroth (2011)]. Moreover, the aid literature scarcely examines the role and influence of policy networks on aid policy processes. Even less is known about how policy networks and processes operate in Pakistan, and how multiple actors interact and bargain in game and network settings to manage decisions. This would allow to explore if NMS adopted in the global South are similar or different to those employed in the West, for instance Ayres and Stafford (2014); Klijn, Steijn, and Edelenbos (2010). In this context, studying process management strategies helps to bring the aid policy process to life in academic analysis. The value in this is that it may confirm or question the existing beliefs about how the aid community works on the ground.

To meet the research objective, this study uses Klijn and Koppenjan's (2016) process analysis. The *process analysis* establishes where and between whom decisions are taken, and what network management strategies (NMS) actors practice to initiate and facilitate game and network interactions. Assessing specific NMS would help to explain broadly how donors and the Pakistan government proceed with interactions in the core action (donor-government) arena for managing the aid policy process. This approach is novel since no other studies on foreign aid have used this analysis as a theoretical framework. Moreover, this analysis has not been utilised to explore aid policy process in Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

Given the nature of this research and its focus on a detailed and rich analysis of the policy process managed through aid relations in the complex aid policy network, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate. To understand how the aid community works on the ground, a quantitative analysis of aid data could be misleading without the nuances explanations that this research offers. This qualitative approach complements the existing research in this area that tends to use quantitative aid evaluation methods.

A single-method approach, namely, semi-structured interviews, was used to collect primary data in this research. Adopting a purposive-snowball sampling technique, interviews were conducted with a range of research participants representing various actors (or organisations) from the aid policy network in

Pakistan. A face-to-face 'executive interview' approach was adopted to collect the data. It was anticipated that interaction with the participants – executives and senior officials—would allow us to involve them in discussion and record detailed information.

Initially, a sample of 36 potential respondents was selected purposively from different groups of actors in the aid policy network in Pakistan. However, there was also a degree of snowballing. During the fieldwork, the snowballing technique allowed to interview seven individuals in addition. The fieldwork was successfully concluded with 43 interviewees in total: 12 from donors (six each from major and other donors); 12 from Government (nine from federal and four from provincial government); six from external interest groups; seven from domestic interest groups; and five from independent groups.[5]

After the collection of data from the fieldwork, the audio recordings and field notes were transcribed, coded and analysed to elicit findings. Ritchie and Lewis's (2003) Framework (or thematic framework) method was used to analyse the data. The preliminary findings of this study were shared with the participants to seek respondent validation. The NVivo software program was used for handling and analysing the qualitative information. To maintain the reliability and validity, an evaluation of the quality of this research was based largely on the criterion of *trustworthiness* [Bryman (2012)].

MANAGING THE AID POLICY PROCESS

Every step in the aid policy process involves management practices and decisions that are based on certain perceptions, interests, rules and behaviour. In the aid policy network, a number of network management strategies are adopted by actors to govern processes, facilitate game and network interactions.

Connecting Strategies

Mutual interests in policy problems and interdependencies bring actors to initiate interactions and mobilise (or withdraw) resources in order to achieve coordinated action to resolve a particular problem and/or implement a certain policy or programme. The findings confirm the conventional wisdom about the scale of funds and donors' technical expertise. These seem to be the most important considerations for building new, or strengthening existing, aid relationships. Due to this motivation, the Pakistan government prefers to collaborate and interact more frequently with a small number of large multilateral and bilateral donors, rather than interacting with numerous smaller development partners. This is because smaller development partners often have limited funds for specific policy sectors or interventions, carry a low level of technical expertise compared to major donors, and have small-scale operations.

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[5]Characteristics of these strategic groups of actors are described in Khan, F.J. (2016).

Further, interactions with major donors were considered cost effective, as it lowers transaction costs compared to processing and implementing multiple small projects. From the donors' perspective, larger portfolio and diplomatic relations allow donors to have a broader development policy agenda through which they can accommodate more requests from the recipient government. Donors carrying large and critical resources enjoy more access to information and relevant offices due to a stronger donor-government relationship, and have more leverage in the decision-making process.

In strategic donor-government interactions, actors mobilise their resources to establish, maintain and/or strengthen aid relationships, and sometimes use certain resources as a tool to influence (or counter-influence) policy decisions. Data suggest that donors usually seem to succeed in influencing the decision-making process. They do it through a number of ways, including: mobilising, or withdrawing, funds in line with their existing country partnership strategy; maintaining close contacts with top government management; creating incentives; imposing conditionalities; and presenting research evidence. Furthermore, donors sometimes use political and diplomatic influence if they find it difficult to influence the policy stance of the government. Adding to this, the Pakistan government's foreign exchange requirements, weak domestic research base, and the value of project (or private) benefits in the eyes of government officials further strengthen the position of donors to influence policy decisions.

In the network literature creating incentives is a connecting strategy [Klijn, *et al.* (2010)] that actors adopt to boost cooperation in the game. In donor-government interactions, the use of incentives (project or private benefits) is considered to be a powerful tool that promotes collaboration and cooperation in aid relationships. It helps initiate new interactions, enables donors to influence policy decisions, and facilitates actors to mitigate stagnation. The new insights from Pakistan indicate that not only do donors seek influence over the policy choices of the government through creating incentives, but some government officials also proactively seek fringe benefits that would not otherwise be available to them. In fact, the evidence suggest that project (or private) benefits are sometimes viewed as more important considerations for government officials than research evidence, technical soundness of the idea or expected outcomes. In such a scenario, incentives may lead to delaying tactics – through reluctance to share information and disinclination towards meeting agreed targets—in managing the aid policy process. This resonates with the finding of Bräutigam (2000) who notes that aid recipients have little incentive to change a situation in which they receive larger amounts of aid and many fringe benefits. Interestingly, research participants indicate that donors are usually aware of delaying tactics to retain benefits arising from donor-funded activities. However, since donor officials face strict forms of accountability to senior managers, they try to overcome delays to avoid process complications, and

hence stay in close contact with the relevant government officials or place conditionalities on the recipient.

Exploring Content

In the aid policy network, a range of actors are involved and vary in their objectives, interests and opinions about the problem definition and desired solution. Therefore, once the game starts, strategies of 'exploring content' become necessary to clarify the goals and perceptions of actors [Ayres and Stafford (2014); Klijn, *et al.* (2010)].

In Pakistan, the Pakistan Development Forum (PDF)—a formal high-level annual gathering (discontinued in 2010) of government organisations and development partners—used to provide opportunities to development partners exploring the government's development priorities and its future strategic directions related to macroeconomic and social policy issues. The findings indicate that (at the time of writing) there was no formal platform in Pakistan. In the absence of it, actors rely on the stated objectives articulated in their respective policy/partnership documents. For instance, donors may choose particular sectors or interventions from the government's priorities that match their existing agenda, while the government may approach the (most relevant) donor, knowing in advance of a mutual interest in a certain policy sector.

This absence of a formal platform not only results in weak donor-donor coordination in Pakistan, but can further empower a few influential actors in the aid policy network. However, the findings also indicate that both the donor and the Pakistan government often prefer to engage in one-to-one settings. It is because the involvement of too many players, with different perceptions and preferences, and competing objectives in a single game could cause process complications in managing interactions. It is likely that the presence of a few influential actors and preference for one-to-one engagement strategy explain the absence of a formal platform.

'Managing and collecting research' is another network management strategy aid actors employ to inform, and sometimes to influence, policy decisions. The findings indicate that academia and think tanks in Pakistan are not particularly effective at producing high-quality research. This is because of inadequate funds, a poor human resource base, lack of analytical skills, and poor quality data. These problems limit their impact on government policies. Further, the new data suggest that since the research base is widely thought to be not strong enough in Pakistan, the government sometimes has to rely on the evidence provided by the donor in the absence of domestic research. This provides donors with an edge over the government in policy dialogues and project negotiations, and opens up possibilities for them to utilise their research to influence policy decisions in donor-government engagements.

Process Agreements

The donor-government interactions are not always smooth since each process involves a certain degree of conflict which sometimes leads to stagnation (or impasse) in collective choice and/or collective action situations. The analysis of stagnation explained how donors and the government tackled differences in the game while managing aid policy decisions. Probing the reasons which could lead to stagnation in aid relationships, donor and government officials expressed contrasting views. Donor officials blamed the Pakistan government for initiating politically-driven and technically infeasible project proposals, whereas government officials held donors liable for inflexibility over their preferences and set procedures. Furthermore, the research findings also suggest that stagnation was sometimes a result of divergent donor and government approaches towards handling the aid policy process. For instance, the decision-makers in the government tend to consider socio-economic and political repercussions, whereas donor officials often pursue technically-sound solutions to (complex) policy problems, without considering political repercussions.

This research reveals a number of different ways donor and government officials may consider managing an impasse in the policy game. To manage an impasse, actors seek to continue strategic interactions and assess other policy options which are more acceptable to participating parties. To mitigate the situation, actors may generate incentives, utilise informal channels, present research evidence and/or involve technical experts. Further, closed-door discussions can sometimes be effective in conveying intentions openly and sharing reservations on any part of the project design or arrangements. However, when stagnation is intense and participants have an incentive to proceed, then officials sometimes seek assistance from a mediator with whom they maintain direct ties.

In network interactions, building and maintaining informal relations is perceived to be an essential skill in network management. In this research, informality can be defined as an open, relaxed and interpersonal relationship that is, to some extent, trusting and unofficial in nature. The new data indicate that informality in aid relations helps to remove or limit the possibility of conflict and overcome stagnation in the game, strengthen aid relationships through clarifying goals and perceptions, and facilitates actors in avoiding or clarifying miscommunication. Informality may provide actors with an opportunity to gain the attention of their counterparts through interpersonal relations and influence the decision-making process.

Though it seems obvious that informality often leads to a better understanding and improved coordination in aid relationships, the research findings reveal some downsides to it. A number of respondents expressed their concern about experiencing (undue) high expectations of colleagues related to

process management which sometimes place them in a difficult situation. Informality in aid relations may also encourage individuals to seek personal favours – such as income opportunities for next of kin, or visa clearance requests for their family or friends—and project (or private) benefits more readily. Further, too much informality in communications and documentation would lead to problems down the road. The importance of trust and informality is there, but ignoring proper documentation of events and meetings, and bypassing essential procedural steps may lead to institutional memory loss.

Measuring the effectiveness of network management strategies and collaborative outcomes is potentially problematic due to the fact that actors have different goals and aspirations that may change over time [Ayres and Stafford (2014)]. Several researchers [such as Altaf (2011); Bräutigam (2000); Manning (2012); Temple (2010)] considered multiple objectives or mixed motives of donors and the recipients of aid which tend to be conflicting due to differences in actors' perceptions and preferences. In the aid literature, the commitment of recipient governments has sometimes been questioned by observers, but in this research some research participants expressed their reservations over donors' commitment too. A number of respondents indicate that donor officials are often concerned about their individual performance and meeting the expectations of their management in headquarters through signing new loan agreements, achieving high disbursement targets and ensuring scheduled repayments.

CONCLUSIONS

Responding to the call of scholars to open the 'black box' of the aid delivery system, this research contributes to the aid debate by providing rich, contextual data of the situation in Pakistan. More specifically, this research makes a contribution to the aid literature and literature on policy networks by opening the 'black box' of the aid delivery system in Pakistan. New insights from this research are valuable in improving existing knowledge about how the aid community interacts and manages the aid policy process on the ground; which would eventually contribute to the understanding of aid effectiveness. These insights provide a deeper understanding of aid relations and the policy process in Pakistan that might be drawn upon to inform future policy design and delivery in this highly complex area. Following are the key findings of this research.

Connecting strategies were the most prevalent strategies in managing the aid policy process in Pakistan. This shows that (a) the analysis can be successfully utilised in network research in the global South, and (b) many of the assumptions in the network management literature about how networks operate in the global North are also relevant for the global South, e.g., initiating new interactions, resource mobilisation, and creating incentives for cooperation.

In strategic donor-government interactions, pivotal roles of incentives, research and informality were identified in managing the aid policy process in Pakistan. These were considered to be powerful tools that not only promote collaboration and cooperation, but also enable actors to initiate new interactions, mitigate stagnation and influence policy decisions. However, value of donor-led incentives in the eyes of government officials may lead to delaying tactics in managing the aid policy process and/or further strengthen the position of donors to influence policy decisions. Weak research base in Pakistan may open up possibilities for donors to utilise their research to influence policy decisions in donor-government engagements. And, informality could lead to complications in managing the aid policy process.

Last, but not least, the absence of a formal platform in Pakistan could not only result in weak donor-donor coordination, but it may also leads to divergent donor and government approaches towards development priorities, and can further empower a few influential actors in the aid policy network.

Policy Recommendations

In the light of the research findings, this study makes the following recommendations:

(i) There is a need to strengthen domestic research in Pakistan which is considered to be so poor that it usually fails to grab the attention of the policymakers. A separate research and development (R&D) fund for academia and think tanks, and allocation of research grants under each ministry and department can be a first step towards this. Further, special emphasis is required to ensure the quality of research and its dissemination to inform policy decisions.

(ii) Although the importance of informality is well recognised for better understanding and improved coordination in aid relationships, however proper documentation of engagements and compliance with official requirements should be ensured to build/ maintain the institutional memory. This will help to replace *ad hoc* arrangements and strengthen institutions.

(iii) The revival of the Pakistan Development Forum could provide collaborative opportunities where development partners and the government could interact frequently, share information, float innovative ideas, and learn best practices to improve coordination and cooperation to make aid work better. In addition to this, the federal and provincial governments should also set up specialised platforms for specific policy sectors and/or regions. These platforms would also provide opportunities to small bilateral donor agencies and other development partners (NGOs/CSOs)—who otherwise were found often detached from the national development agenda—to participate

in joint development operations. This would help development partners and the government to improve coordination, cooperation and collaborative efforts to make aid work better.

Finally, for future research, several authors have discussed the role of 'trust' in network management, however it has rarely been touched on in the aid literature. Further, there has been little attention given to how perverse incentives can be dissuaded in managing foreign aid in a recipient country such as Pakistan. Research on the role of trust and perverse incentives in aid relationships and their implications for ultimate development outcomes would be informative for policymakers and international development practitioners.

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