



Frames for aid policy: the work of van der Veen

By Jo Spratt
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Recent blogs considering the national interest's [role](#) in the Australian aid program ([here](#) and [here](#)), reminded me of A. Maurits van der Veen's research. Any country's national interest is, to some degree, a reflection of the national identity. What Van der Veen does is meticulously piece together and test an argument about how a country's national identity influences specific aid policy objectives, through frames.

In his 200 book, [Ideas, interests and foreign aid](#), van der Veen argues "ideas about the goals and purposes of aid policy shape its formulation and implementation" (p. 2). Using the metaphor of a Swiss army knife, van der Veen depicts how aid gets used for a variety of different goals, all packaged-up as 'aid'. While most literature infers motivations from behaviour, van der Veen's work measures aid's motivations, in an attempt to answer the question 'why do countries give ODA?'.

Van der Veen approaches his research through a constructivist lens: ideas are central. Drawing from the wider literature, van der Veen classifies ideas into three groups: "core values or beliefs, general cognitive and normative attitudes or frames, and issue-specific ideas about particular policy options" (p. 27). Van der Veen focuses specifically on the

middle group of ideas – the frames. Frames connect core beliefs and values, such as national identity, with the more superficial issue-specific ideas shaping policy decisions.

Impressively, van der Veen undertook deep content analysis of fifty years (1950-2000) worth of legislative debates on aid in Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Norway. Through this analysis he illustrates how a country's 'national identity' emerges from a particular state's history and culture. It is these core values and beliefs that are translated into a state's aid policy, through frames. These are the broad mental constructs within which decision-makers place aid, helping to build shared understandings of aid. The seven frames van der Veen found were: enlightened or indirect self-interest, humanitarianism, power and influence, obligation and duty, security, self-affirmation and prestige, and wealth and commercial interests.

Van der Veen found that particular frames waxed and waned over time in each country, but particular frames had broad dominance in each. The economic self-interest (wealth) and obligation frames dominated Belgium's ODA. Similarly, the controlling frames in Italy were wealth and reputation. For the Netherlands, power and humanitarianism were the most important frames. In Norway, humanitarianism and reputation ruled.

From his analysis, van der Veen creates several hypotheses about ODA's quality (administration, tied aid and multilateral aid), amount and distribution, according to each particular framing category. There are too many to cover here so I offer one illustrative example. Donor countries that view aid within the self-affirmation/prestige frame want to be prominent amongst their peers. Therefore, these countries can be expected to meet or surpass international norms of aid volume and quality. These donors will want recognition for their efforts and so will seek out highly visible recipient countries, and/or those that are also popular with other donor countries. They will also give more to larger, higher-profile projects. As well, ODA is likely to be delivered to friendly administrations because they are more likely to be grateful. If status within a particular multilateral organisation is pursued, then that multilateral will receive a large amount of ODA from a self-affirming, prestige-seeking donor. However, if the status is desired at a global, more general level, then multilateral aid will be avoided because any individual donors' contribution tends to be mixed-in with all the others.

Testing out his various hypotheses – that particular frames would be associated with aid quality, volume and distribution – van der Veen finds support for the predictive value of frames. For example, in terms of aid's quality, he found the aid program's organisation only changed substantially when the broader frame changed, or when there was general agreement the structure could not achieve the goals of the dominant frames at the time.

Both Italy and Belgium, with their strong wealth frames, had high levels of tied aid, at least until the 1990s when this frame began to wane.

On aid volumes, van der Veen found the humanitarian frame was associated with larger aid volumes. This was so for Norway, but also important was the reputation frame during the 1990s, when Norway wanted to maintain its winning position as the most generous donor. In countries and at times where the obligation frame was strong, international norms influenced increasing aid volumes.

In terms of where aid went, van der Veen found the obligation frame was connected to aid to former colonies, and the humanitarian frame was linked with aid to poorer/needier recipients. In Italy, the wealth frame was so dominant that for a long time private sector receipt of contracts dictated where aid went. These are only some examples of van der Veen's rich results, and some findings are more nuanced. Yet what they show is that collective frames shape specific aid policies, and these frames are derived from a country's national identity.

What van der Veen's work tells us is that deep beliefs, such as national identity, impact upon how aid policy is framed, and therefore how issue-specific aid objectives are shaped. This then means whatever a country's national identity, and national interest, are, they eventually filter through to influence aid's impact on the ground. Perhaps one way of understanding what drives Australia's aid, and therefore its effect on the ground, would be to use van der Veen's framework to uncover Australia's aid frames.

Joanna Spratt is a PhD candidate at the Crawford School of Public Policy. She is also a consultant and coordinator of NZ Aid and Development Dialogues (NZADDs), with a background in nursing and international development.

About the author/s

Jo Spratt

Dr Joanna Spratt is a Visiting Fellow at the Development Policy Centre, and a Registered Nurse. She is currently Oxfam New Zealand's Advocacy and Campaigns Director.

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