Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution

Thomas Carothers, Diane de Gramont
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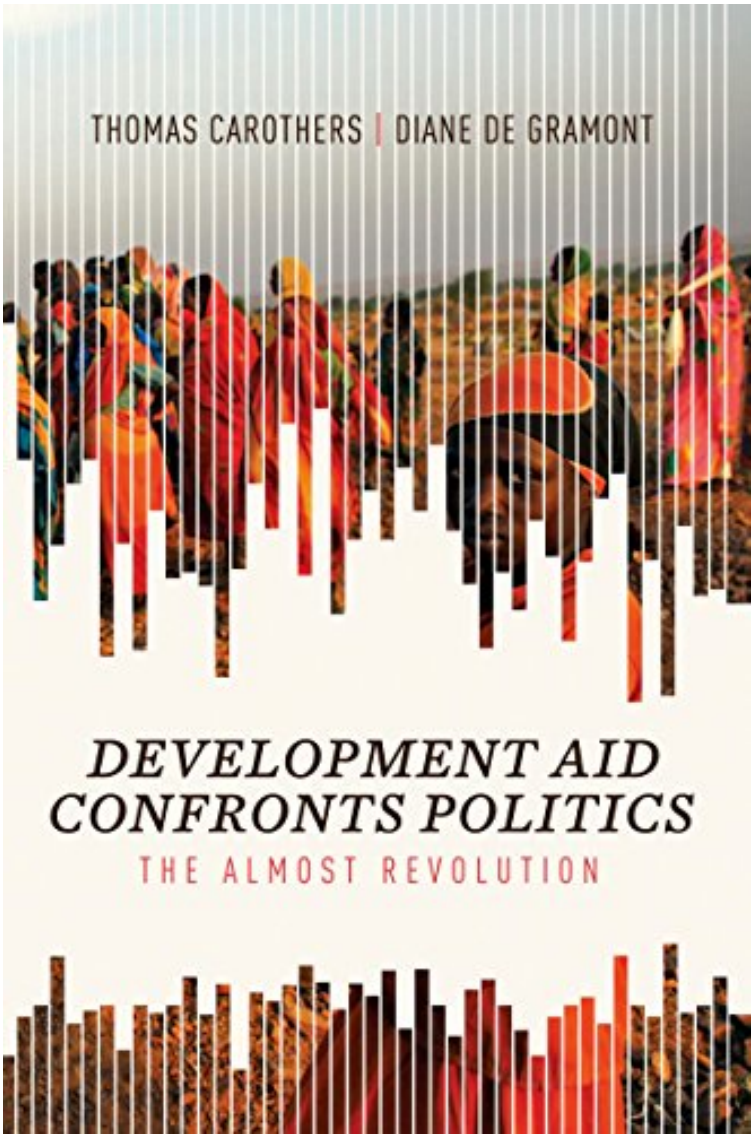

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Thomas Carothers, Diane de Gramont : Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Outstanding analysis of an underexamined aspect of developmentBy Eric ReadingThis book provides a deep examination of the intersection of politics and development assistance. The authors clearly lay out two different areas of intersection. The first and more obvious is assistance aimed at political development--promoting democracy, rights, and governance. The second is "politically smart approaches" to more traditional areas of socioeconomic development such as health, agriculture, or economic growth.As a development

practitioner who has worked in both governance and these more traditional development areas, the author's examination if the history and state of the art in the second area was the most intriguing. They look at how formal political economy analysis began to appear within development agencies in the early 90's and how it has evolved in the past two decades across a range of development agencies in different countries.I've already recommended this book to more people than any other I've read in the past few years, and I'd highly recommend that all development practitioners, policy makers, academics, and students read it. The content is useful to people far beyond those focused on democracy and governance who have traditionally been the audience for Carothers work.2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A difficult subject but some optimistic prospectsBy AcornDevelopment aid from rich countries to poor ones is a deeply political and often fraught affair. It is usually justified in terms of reducing poverty, improving security, creating markets for future trade, or humanitarian assistance after a natural disaster or armed conflict. All these reasons are plausible to a voting public and in most cases voters do not look beyond them. In times of austerity like the present, aid comes under greater scrutiny and there is a push for more efficiency in how aid is delivered and for a reduction in administrative costs, but calls to scrap aid altogether are few and far between.Modern development aid differs from the colonialism of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Colonial powers rarely expected that the people in the countries they exploited would eventually become `modern'. Indeed, there was often a push by colonial powers to preserve `traditional' societies. Development aid on the other hand is largely about turning people, systems and institutions in poor countries into something that looks like the West. Both colonialism and aid are forms of cultural chauvinism, and both are based on daft assumptions, but the difference in expectations means they look unalike in practice.Carothers de Gramont have written a detailed and thoughtful overview of development aid from the perspective of how well political analysis and political issues have been incorporated into aid planning, management and policy. They survey the changes in thinking about aid from the 1950s to the present and the rise of governance and politics as issues of concern to aid donors.Early approaches assumed that economic growth could be achieved by investment and the application of technology from rich countries, and that this would in turn lead to modern democratic societies popping up all over the globe. The rise of authoritarian governments in many poor countries from the 1960s and the overarching context of the Cold War saw a shift away from this early optimism and a narrower focus in aid programmes on poverty reduction and the provision of basic needs such as health care, education, modern agriculture, infrastructure and clean water. The rich countries were assumed to have the technical answers that would allow such services to reach the poor. Simple. Indeed, too simple to be true.The rise of neoliberal economics in the 1980s saw an emphasis on market-led reforms and making governments leaner and more efficient in poor countries. This helped to engender greater interest in governance and how governments operated. The end of the Cold War in 1989 and the decade of chest-thumping by the West that followed saw more of a push for democratic institutions and human rights in poor countries, and these themes were taken up to varying degrees by aid agencies.The failure of the market-led approach and recognition that governments are necessary to regulate markets and to provide an enabling environment for economies were part of the sobering up process after 2000. The attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001 also led to governments in rich countries to become far more interested in security and stability issues in poor nations, and to try and understand why the poor hated the rich so much. Governance, democracy and politics have since become elements in many aid programmes. However, the severe restrictions on personal freedoms, the increasing disregard for the rule of law and the collusion of political elites and plutocrats in Western countries since 2001, including the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, have all served to undermine the credibility of rich governments when preaching to poor nations about democracy and `good governance'. Kettles don't like to be lectured by pots.While the book covers the changing trends in aid over the past five decades, it reads as if these changes replaced one another. Yet if you look at the work of any major aid agency and speak to its staff, you find it is more like a palimpsest of ideas, with often inconsistent concepts being jumbled together and bandied about with little attention to logic. All aid agencies are saturated with the history of their own fads and fashions, and this comes through in their often messy ideas about aid.While political issues have been increasingly recognised as important in development, both for setting goals and choosing how to deliver aid, emphasis on governance and politics is still a minority interest in most aid agencies. The book looks at the adoption of methods like participation, demand-side stimulus, political economy analysis and support for democratic processes, but none of these is standard in aid and there is often resistance to them in both agencies and recipient governments. The technocratic mindset still dominates.Why hasn't the political approach been more accepted? The authors look at some of the reasons for this. In part it is because the case for the political approach has not been well made. How would it improve aid? It is a point on which this book could have been more forceful, especially in two areas. First, many development projects and programmes look good when they are being implemented and some have impressive results to show at completion. But go back a decade later and often the impact of the aid has all but disappeared. Indeed, you are very likely to find a new project doing exactly the same as the one undertaken years before. Aid can appear like the revolving doors of drug addiction treatment and prison rehabilitation.Second, the design of aid projects and programmes is normally done on the basis of very superficial analysis. An external team will fly in and interview a limited range of national partners and other donors, look at some official statistics and be briefed by donor staff, then write the design with little or no

outside involvement. Design teams, like the aid agency staff they report to, usually have no capacity in the local language, a grasp of local cultural, economic and political issues that is based on secondary sources, and a set of existing tools and models that looked good somewhere else. No business entrepreneur would approach a major investment in such an amateurish way but this is par for the course in aid work.The use of political analysis - understanding local context, power relations, local incentives and motivations, social divisions and vested interests - will help to ensure that the design of aid activities is more appropriate to the country where the activities are to be implemented. Politically astute management of those activities - which demands in-depth local knowledge, language skills, diplomacy and respect - is more likely to ensure that activities will be accepted and sustained in the longer term. These arguments are scattered here and there through the book but are insufficiently brought together to make a convincing case.When aid goes wrong, as if often does, aid agencies tend to blame the governments of recipient countries or the contractors implementing activities. Sometimes that is fair criticism but often it is not. Aid agencies are woeful when it comes to self-examination. Carothers de Gramont look at a number of aid agencies and identify common internal problems that need to be addressed: weak staff capacity, narrow-minded and overly conservative management, and unresolved disputes about aid objectives and delivery methods.The authors are optimistic but pragmatic. There is much to be done to improve aid and still many obstacles. The attraction of the technocratic approach is powerful as it requires the least amount of thinking - bureaucrats anywhere can empathise with that. Cash-strapped governments in the West are putting increased pressure on aid agencies to produce evidence of results and impact, not necessarily a bad thing, but this neoliberal backlash sees statistical data as the only valid evidence and spending less as the best measure of efficiency. In a conversation about evidence a few years ago, a staffer in a large aid agency told me: `if we can convert this information into figures, then it will be objective'. Such dribbling idiocy is, sadly, the new orthodoxy.Aid involves complex systems and a high degree of uncertainty, neither of which are amenable to simplistic approaches. The authors of this book are to be commended for tackling a difficult subject in a creative and measured way. Despite the complex subject, the narrative is well-structured and eminently readable. At the end of each chapter there is a conclusion covering the key points and the text is supported by detailed notes, an index and a thematic bibliography that suggests further reading.If you want some insight into the role of political thinking in overseas aid, this is a helpful guide. For those working in development, much will be depressingly familiar, but hopefully you can take heart from the authors' endearing optimism.

A new lens on development is changing the world of international aid. The overdue recognition that development in all sectors is an inherently political process is driving aid providers to try to learn how to think and act politically.Major donors are pursuing explicitly political goals alongside their traditional socioeconomic aims and introducing more politically informed methods throughout their work. Yet these changes face an array of external and internal obstacles, from heightened sensitivity on the part of many aid-receiving governments about foreign political interventionism to inflexible aid delivery mechanisms and entrenched technocratic preferences within many aid organizations.This pathbreaking book assesses the progress and pitfalls of the attempted politics revolution in development aid and charts a constructive way forward.Contents:Introduction1. The New Politics AgendaThe Original Framework: 1960s-1980s2. Apolitical RootsBreaking the Political Taboo: 1990s-2000s3. The Door Opens to Politics4. Advancing Political Goals5. Toward Politically Informed MethodsThe Way Forward6. Politically Smart Development Aid7. The Unresolved Debate on Political Goals8. The Integration FrontierConclusion9. The Long Road to Politics

"A hugely insightful book on how the international development community has failed to take politics into account in its efforts to help poor countries, with sometimes disastrous results. Carothers and de Gramont incisively chronicle the evolution of thinking on this critical topic and set out a practical agenda for how aid practitioners can do better."mdash;Francis Fukuyama, author, The Origins of Political Order"The assertion that development aid is, or should be, political, sparks widely diverging reactions, from outrage at crude Western interference to recognition that aid must understand domestic politics. The authors have done us all a service by rigorously dissecting the different meanings of politics in aid and providing a clear understanding of what smarter aid practice requires."mdash;Mark Malloch-Brown, former minister of state, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office"The story of how aid agencies have finally accepted that lsquo;politics matterrsquo; in shaping development outcomes and what it means in practice is brilliantly told in this penetrating book. The sweep of the authorsrsquo; research and the power of their insights will stir scholars and practitioners alike."mdash;Adrian Leftwich, research director, Developmental Leadership Program"The authors bring a great amount of experience, common sense, and clarity to explain what 'taking politics into account' means in foreign aid, encompassing goals such as democracy promotion as well as addressing the political economy of economic reform."mdash;Dani Rodrik, professor, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University ldquo;A hugely insightful book on how the international development community has failed to take politics into account in its efforts to help poor countries, with sometimes disastrous results. Carothers and de Gramont incisively chronicle the evolution of thinking on this critical topic and set out a practical agenda for how aid

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