Why do countries give foreign aid? Although many countries have official development assistance programmes, this book argues that no two of them see the purpose of these programmes in the same way. Moreover, the way countries frame that purpose has shaped aid policy choices past and present. The author examines how Belgium long gave aid out of a sense of obligation to its former colonies, the Netherlands was more interested in pursuing international influence, Italy has focused on the reputational payoffs of aid flows, and Norwegian aid has had strong humanitarian motivations since the beginning. But at no time has a single frame shaped any one country’s aid policy exclusively. Instead, analyzing half a century of legislative debates on aid in these four countries, this book presents a unique picture both of cross-national and over-time patterns in the salience of different aid frames and of varying aid programmes that resulted.

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| 119 | Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot  
  | **International Practices**  
  | 118 | Ayşe Zarakol  
  | **After defeat**  
  | How the East learned to live with the West  
  | 117 | Andrew Phillips  
  | **War, religion and empire**  
  | The transformation of international orders  
  | 116 | Joshua Busby  
  | **Moral movements and foreign policy**  
  | 115 | Séverine Autesserre  
  | **The trouble with the Congo**  
  | Local violence and the failure of international peacebuilding  
  | 114 | Deborah D. Avant, Martha Finnemore and Susan K. Sell  
  | **Who governs the globe?**  
  | 113 | Vincent Pouliot  
  | **International security in practice**  
  | The politics of NATO–Russia diplomacy  
  | 112 | Columba Peoples  
  | **Justifying ballistic missile defence**  
  | Technology, security and culture  
  | 111 | Paul Sharp  
  | **Diplomatic theory of international relations**  
  | 110 | John A. Vasquez  
  | **The war puzzle revisited**  
  | 109 | Rodney Bruce Hall  
  | **Central banking as global governance**  
  | Constructing financial credibility  
  | 108 | Milja Kurki  
  | **Causation in international relations**  
  | Reclaiming causal analysis  
  | 107 | Richard M. Price  
  | **Moral limit and possibility in world politics**  
  | 106 | Emma Haddad  
  | **The refugee in international society**  
  | Between sovereigns  

*Series list continues after index*
Ideas, Interests and Foreign Aid

A. MAURITS VAN DER VEE
Contents

List of figures  page viii
List of tables  ix
Preface  xi
1 The many uses of foreign aid  1
2 One policy, multiple goals: framing and foreign aid  23
3 Debates about aid: contents and patterns  48
4 Aid frames: origins and evolution  77
5 The administration of aid policy  110
6 The generosity contest: determinants of aid volume  139
7 The popularity contest: selecting the recipients of aid  171
8 Conclusion: frames and policy  210
Appendix A: Legislative debates coded  235
Appendix B: Debate coding examples  247
Appendix C: Aid distribution: data and sources  259
Bibliography  264
Index  283
Figures

3.1 Relative weight of different aid frames, averaged over all four countries  page 61
3.2 Relative weight of different aid frames, Belgium  65
3.3 Relative weight of different aid frames, Italy  68
3.4 Relative weight of different aid frames, the Netherlands  70
3.5 Relative weight of different aid frames, Norway  73
6.1 Aggregate ODA performance of DAC member states  143
6.2 Official development assistance of Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Norway, expressed as a percentage of each country’s gross national product  144
## Tables

1.1 The seven broad frames relevant to aid policy  

page 10

2.1 Basic hypotheses about the relationship between frames and aid policy  

45

3.1 Arguments for aid and their allocation to different frames  

57

3.2 Relative weight of general frames over time  

60

3.3 Relative weight of general frames over time, relative to dataset average  

62

3.4 Average weight of each frame, for the entire period 1955–2000, per country  

64

3.5 Strength of general frames over time in Belgium, relative to dataset average  

66

3.6 Strength of general frames over time in Italy, relative to dataset average  

69

3.7 Strength of general frames over time in the Netherlands, relative to dataset average  

71

3.8 Strength of general frames over time in Norway, relative to dataset average  

74

3.9 Frequency with which the salience of a frame exceeded the dataset average by at least 25 per cent  

75

5.1 Hypotheses about the relationship between frames and tied aid  

128

5.2 Hypotheses about the relationship between frames and multilateral aid  

132

6.1 Hypotheses about the relationship between frames and aid volume  

151

6.2 Summary statistics for dependent and explanatory variables  

164

6.3 Determinants of aid volume, uninteracted, panel-specific autocorrelation  

165
List of tables

6.4 Determinants of aid volume, interacted, panel-specific autocorrelation 166
6.5 Determinants of aid volume, uninteracted, no autocorrelation 167
6.6 Determinants of aid volume, interacted, no autocorrelation 168
7.1 Top aid recipients over time, all DAC donors 174
7.2a Top aid recipients over time: Belgium 176
7.2b Top aid recipients over time: Italy 177
7.2c Top aid recipients over time: The Netherlands 178
7.2d Top aid recipients over time: Norway 179
7.3 Hypotheses about the relationship between frames and aid distribution 181
7.4 Independent variables that may affect the selection of aid recipients, with associated frames 199
7.5a Selection: interacted regressions, all countries combined and each country separately 201
7.5b Aid share: interacted regressions, all countries combined and each country separately 203
7.5c Additional data: interacted regressions, all countries combined and each country separately 205
A.1 Debates coded for Belgium 236
A.2 Debates coded for Italy 240
A.3 Debates coded for the Netherlands 243
A.4 Debates coded for Norway 245
B.1 Motivations for aid, with sample quotations, by general frame 248
C.1 Data used to generate Communist-border variable 261
C.2 Summary statistics for non-donor-specific explanatory variables, after processing 262
C.3a Summary statistics for explanatory variables: Belgium 263
C.3b Summary statistics for explanatory variables: Italy 263
C.3c Summary statistics for explanatory variables: the Netherlands 263
C.3d Summary statistics for explanatory variables: Norway 263
Preface

I have been interested in foreign aid for almost as long as I can remember. Growing up in the Netherlands, I read the free monthly magazine *Sam Sam* (Working Together), published by the Dutch government to educate children about development assistance and distributed to every student in the upper grades of elementary school. When I began to pay attention to national politics some years later, I took for granted that although specific features of the development aid programme were frequently debated in the legislature and in the media, the need to have a large and generous aid programme was rarely questioned. Indeed, it was not until I moved to the United States for college that I encountered arguments against foreign aid per se.

If Americans had a different view of the practice of development assistance policy, they also appeared to have a different view of the theory that might explain it. Rational choice theory, rather more popular in the United States than in Europe, seemed to suggest that government policies must always pursue material interests, which made aid policy – with its ostensibly altruistic goals – hard to explain. I began to wonder how aid policy could be perceived so differently in the Netherlands and the United States, even though the policy instruments were essentially the same; I also wondered whether these differing perceptions might explain how widely aid programmes varied across donor states; and I wondered how the logic of rationality might account for a policy that seemed to have so many different possible motivations.

It quickly became clear that the best way to turn these puzzles into a manageable research project was to look in more detail at the aid policies of countries that were broadly similar on most key dimensions, but whose aid programmes differed considerably. Accordingly, I decided to focus on small- and medium-sized European countries (even though my argument generalizes to all aid
donors, as I explain in the conclusion). As I researched aid policy and elaborated my ideas over the ensuing years, I found that different perceptions of the purpose of aid policy – i.e. aid ‘frames’ – have a tremendous impact on the shape of a country’s aid programme. On the other hand, it proved unnecessary to look for non-rational motivations: while policy-makers often pursue non-material goals – such as meeting an obligation or establishing a reputation – they do so quite rationally. In fact, the key to understanding aid policy lies not in explaining away aid frames that highlight non-material goals, but rather in obtaining reliable measures of the strength of different frames. Here I found legislative debates to be invaluable, and I spent many months combing through the parliamentary records of Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Norway to learn how legislators had framed aid from the inception of national aid programmes to the present.

Over the life of this project I have been fortunate to receive support from more people and organizations than I can ever properly thank. A Mellon Foundation Dissertation Research Grant through the Department of Government at Harvard University supported my initial investigations into the topic. Krupp Foundation Grants through Harvard’s Center for European Studies made possible extensive field research in 1995 and 1996 in the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and Norway, as well as the initial phase of dissertation writing during the 1996–1997 academic year. Further field research during the summer of 1997 was supported by a Jens Aubrey Westengard Summer Research Grant, and the processing of that research was facilitated by a Mellon Foundation writing grant through Harvard’s Government Department. Without the generous support of these different foundations, it is unlikely that I would have been able to tackle a project of this scope or bring it to successful completion.

My field research would not have been possible without the assistance and accessibility of a number of libraries and research institutes, many of which I have visited repeatedly over the years. In all four countries studied, the libraries and the librarians of the national aid administrations – DGIS in The Hague, ABOS in Brussels, DGCS in Rome and NORAD in Oslo – were extremely helpful. In addition, several research institutes graciously let me use their libraries and offered me space to work. In particular, in Italy, the Istituto Affari Internazionali
(IAI) offered me the use of their library as an ersatz office for a number of weeks. Similarly, in Oslo, the Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt (NUPI) generously provided office space during the summer of 1996, and its library and librarians were invaluable during my research there. In addition, stimulating lunch conversations at NUPI greatly added to my understanding of Norwegian politics. A subsequent stay at the ARENA research institute in Oslo some years later proved equally worthwhile and productive.

At Harvard University, I enjoyed affiliations with the Center for International Affairs and the Center for European Studies. After receiving my PhD, I was able to develop the dissertation’s argument further during a post-doctoral fellowship at the Christopher H. Browne Center for International Politics at the University of Pennsylvania. I updated the study with data throughout the year 2000 during my first years at the University of Georgia, while the final revisions were undertaken at my current institutional home, the College of William & Mary. I owe a considerable debt of gratitude to all these institutions for the supportive and stimulating intellectual environments they offered.

My greatest debts, of course, are to the people whose support, insights and feedback have made this book much better than it otherwise would have been. In particular, I would like to thank (in no particular order) Brad Mann, Pepper Culpepper, Erik Bleich, Mark Duckenfield, David Leal, Javier Astudillo, Marga Gomez-Reino, Wendy Franz, Andrew Moravcsik, Lucy Goodhart, Milada Vachudová, Robert Putnam, Marc Busch, Jeffrey Checkel, Ian Lustick, Tom Callaghy, Avery Goldstein, Dan Miodownik, Markus Crepaz, Chris Allen, Jaroslav Tir and Mike Tierney, and many more whose omission is due only to my faulty memory, not to any lack of appreciation. Special thanks are owed to the members of my dissertation committee, Lisa Martin, Robert Keohane, Stanley Hoffmann and Peter Hall.

On a more personal note, I cannot thank enough the friends who hosted me in different countries: Roel Mulder in The Hague, Gesa and Bernd Haarpaintner in Brussels, and Cille Skaarberg and Olav Storli Ulvund in Oslo. In addition, I owe some of my most memorable experiences in each country (and, quite possibly, my sanity) to the many running friends I made along the way, including Patrick Aris, Mark van Maaren, Frank Staal, Massimiliano Monteforte, Roberto
Fazzari, Bob Sevene, Rusty Snow, Mark Mayall, Jamahl Prince, Darin Shearer, Mary-Louise Culpepper, Joanna Veltri, Eric Stabb, Kirk Smith and Brock Tessman. Last, but not least, I would like to thank Hilda, Bruno, Janny, Gerlof, and above all my wife, Helen Murphy, who has made not only this book but also my life far better.