



# Branding and communication of development assistance

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## Question

*What does the evidence tell us about how the branding and communication of development assistance can impact on the perceptions by different audiences (public, decision makers, beneficiaries) in recipient countries, both in humanitarian situations and in more 'stable' contexts?*

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# 1. Overview

In recent years, international donors and non-governmental organisations have placed increasing emphasis on prominently branding the development interventions that they fund. Spreading knowledge about the identity of an aid project sponsor is one mechanism by which donor governments conduct local level diplomacy with direct beneficiaries and through which they hope to influence public opinion. The most common method of spreading information about the sponsorship of development interventions is through visual branding<sup>1</sup>. Though branding has been part of U.S. aid policy since the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, the emphasis on this foreign policy tool has increased as part of the post-9/11 National Security Strategy. Other donor countries, such as the United Kingdom, have followed suit with their own branding policies.

Although there is a broad assumption that branding improves attitudes toward the donor amongst the recipients of foreign assistance, very little rigorous evidence has been collected to verify this, and the size of the potential effect of branding on recipient attitudes is unknown. In addition, little is known about whether donor's branding strategies effectively communicate that the foreign donor acts as sponsor of a given intervention. Most of the empirical work that examines the impact of aid on public perceptions takes the form of in-country case studies. The literature appears to focus exclusively on USAID programmes. This includes studies focusing on U.S. 'hearts and minds' campaigns in conflict zones, as well as studies focusing on disaster relief aid.

Neither USAID nor any other foreign aid donor has outlined explicitly a branding "theory of change", and the merits of different communication strategies for branding aid have not been explored in detail in the literature. The USAID branding website links to guidelines about branding and to files containing some of the logos used on USAID materials<sup>2</sup>. The documentation makes it clear that the agency wants to establish its brand, but the specific long-term objectives of this endeavor and the mechanisms of attitudinal change through which they would be realised are not identified.

## Key messages

- **Studies on the impact of foreign aid on public opinion about donors in recipient countries provide mixed results.** There is some evidence that greater information about the foreign funding of development projects leads to more positive attitudes toward the donor and companies associated with the donor.
- However, other studies suggest that **branding can produce negative developmental consequences.** It may be that information about external funding of development interventions undermines citizens' support for their domestic governments.
- By contrast, other authors have argued that successful management of foreign aid relationships may **increase the legitimacy of the recipient state in the eyes of its citizens.**

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<sup>1</sup> Beyond citizens in developing countries, branding may also target donor publics and donor legislatures, serving as a tool to communicate to domestic audiences what foreign aid efforts accomplish. Branding increases transparency by providing visual evidence of specific development contributions (Shah 2010)

<sup>2</sup> [www.usaid.gov/branding](http://www.usaid.gov/branding)

- It has been argued that communications strategies can **raise expectations amongst recipient publics unrealistically high**, leading to dissatisfaction with the actual results of programmes on the ground.
- **It has also been argued that donors should focus on transparency rather than branding.** A fixation with branding aid projects can shift the donor's objective away from improving long-term development outcomes toward making sure they receive credit, which may be counter-productive.

## 2. Perceptions towards donors and donor countries

In terms of the audience in the aid-receiving country, the logic behind branding foreign aid is that development interventions are likely to be perceived as helpful and beneficial by local populations. By branding their interventions, donors hope to capitalise on this perception by transferring the positive associations from the development intervention to the donor country that has funded it. Dietrich et al (2015) note that this theory of change relies on two critical assumptions about what a brand connotes. They suggest that both these assumptions may be flawed in any given case.

First, there is an assumption that people associate the donor brand with the donor government. However, given low levels of literacy and education, Dietrich et al (2015) point out it is far from certain that people exposed to a particular donor logo will understand that the logo is meant to make them think about a particular far-away country. Second, for a brand to convey the specific message that foreign aid donors want, there must be an assumption that people will associate the presence of the donor brand with donor sponsorship of the project. While this may be obvious to someone thinking of a development intervention as a foreign aid project, a citizen in a developing country might instead think of a logo on a sign or a building as a piece of advertising that is unrelated to financial assistance (Ibid).

Recent empirical work has emerged that explores the effects of information about foreign aid on attitudes toward the donor country. The evidence is mixed, with some studies finding a positive relationship and others reporting more ambivalent results.

### President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief

Goldsmith et al (2014) use cross-country data to make systematic causal inferences about the impacts of aid on public opinion in recipient countries. They show that a United States aid programme targeted to address HIV and AIDS substantially improved perceptions of the U.S.

In 2003, the U.S. established the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which has provided assistance in more than 80 developing countries. Its declared objectives include stopping the spread of HIV and AIDS, supporting the treatment of people suffering from HIV and AIDS, and mitigating the indirect consequences of the epidemic. USAID has made sure that the fund has a high profile in recipient countries and has carefully and deliberately branded PEPFAR-funded work. The stars and stripes of the U.S. flag are a prominent feature of the PEPFAR logo, and the signing of PEPFAR country agreements is often undertaken by high profile figures in the U.S. administration, increasing in-country media exposure and public awareness. In countries with high HIV prevalence rates, PEPFAR has a significant media profile with improvements in HIV outcomes frequently being attributed to the programme.

Using a large multinational survey with a battery of questions, Goldsmith et al (2014) provide evidence that PEPFAR has had a substantial positive affect on how the general public in recipient countries regard the U.S. leadership. The results of specification tests, placebo tests, and robustness tests suggest that the observed effects are not statistical artifacts. They posit that these results stem from the fact that PEPFAR is targeted to address a widely understood need; has been sustained over some time; is effective; and is highly visible. Their study implies that in addition to its potential humanitarian benefits, foreign aid that has these qualities can serve an important strategic goal by fostering positive perceptions of the donor country among recipient populations.

## **USAID funding for health clinics in Bangladesh**

To understand the effects of information about foreign aid on attitudes toward the donor country, Dietrich et al (2015) embedded an experiment in a nationwide survey in U.S. since 1997. In the control version of the survey, the video was branded at the bottom of the screen with the Smiling Sun logo and name. In the treatment condition, the video was branded with the USAID symbol, and respondents subsequently were informed about the history of U.S. funding for the health clinics. Immediately following the video, respondents in both groups were asked a series of open-ended questions to assess their response to the branding of foreign aid.

The authors found that only a very small portion of survey respondents associated the USAID logo with the idea of United States government funding. Whilst this initial result suggests that USAID's branding technique may not be an effective tool of communication in the developing world, respondents who had previously been exposed to the logo (through interaction with the development intervention) or who had higher levels of education were more likely to correctly infer the identity of the project sponsor after exposure to the USAID logo.

Overall, the authors concede that if the success of foreign aid branding depends on citizens correctly linking a donor logo with the donor country and drawing an inference that the presence of the logo implies sponsorship of the development intervention, their evidence was not encouraging. Whilst the study did find some evidence that providing information about the foreign funding of development projects to Bangladeshi citizens led to a positive perception towards the donor and companies associated with the donor, the authors note that the effect was only slight. Finally, the study did not find evidence of a negative impact of foreign aid on domestic government legitimacy. In fact, information about the foreign sponsorship of a development intervention increased some respondents' confidence in their local governments.

## **Perceptions towards donors in conflict-affected countries**

In conflict-affected countries, it is hoped that aid can help foster supportive attitudes to donors and donor countries, which in turn will engender positive changes in behaviour amongst the general populace. Citizens may see the benefits of development cooperation, or may simply begin to trust international actors. The prospects of aid may in turn incentivise the local population to share critical information with international forces. Alternatively, when the local population is actively resisting foreign military and civilian actors, the prospect of aid may stimulate more peaceful behavior. However, a change in attitude may not automatically lead to a constructive change in behavior. An individual might, for example, hedge his actions by

cooperating with both international actors and local armed groups in order to maximize benefits and distribute risk (Böhnke and Zürcher, 2013).

**Afghanistan:** Evidence from studies on the perception of Afghan citizens suggests they are either not affected by the presence of foreign aid, or else are negatively affected.

Böhnke and Zürcher (2013) conducted a micro-level longitudinal study of 80 communities in northeast Afghanistan between 2007 and 2009, and did not find a positive relationship between aid and the attitudes of the local population toward international civilian and military actors. Their data suggests that the principal drivers of attitudes toward foreign military actors are security concerns and levels of household resources.

Through interviews and focus group discussions with a range of respondents in key institutions and in communities in Afghanistan, Fishstein and Wilder (2012) found that aid and development projects were consistently described in negative terms by Afghans<sup>3</sup>. Perceptions of the misuse and abuse of aid resources fueled a growing distrust of the government and generated skepticism regarding the role of the government and aid agencies. The chief complaints were that projects were insufficient in terms of quantity and of quality; unevenly distributed geographically, politically, and socially; and associated with extensive corruption.

**Palestine:** According to a baseline survey carried out by USAID in 2009, 32 percent of Palestinians reported holding higher opinions of the American people directly because of the aid given in their name. However, in terms of attitudes towards the American government, there is evidence that an overwhelming number of Palestinians continued to harbor negative views. A 2011 poll from the Pew Research Center showed that 80 percent of Palestinians held unfavorable views toward the U.S. government, while only 18 percent held positive ones (Pew Research Center 2011).

Brunner and Nada (2012) investigate whether there is a meaningful relationship between the amount of money spent on foreign aid and public opinion towards the donor in the West Bank. The authors examined extant literature on the subject and conducted interviews with key stakeholders in the United States and the West Bank. Their study determined that aid to the West Bank did not significantly impact public opinion towards the U.S., despite the large sum of assistance that had been lent to the territory. American foreign policy, USAID's high degree of politicisation, and a general lack of awareness of local projects combined to neutralise any significant effect that aid would have had on Palestinian opinions toward the US. Branding did not play a significant positive or negative role in shaping Palestinians' perceptions of donors.

## **Perceptions towards donors in the aftermath of humanitarian disaster**

Following an earthquake in northern Pakistan in 2005, the U.S. pledged significant levels of aid, eventually totalling more than \$500 million. A 2006 Global Attitudes Survey (Pew Research Center 2006) found that the vast majority of Pakistanis were aware of American relief efforts – 85

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<sup>3</sup> Research was conducted in five provinces, three in the south and east (Helmand, Paktia, and Uruzgan) which were considered insecure and two in the north (Balkh and Faryab) which were considered relatively secure, as well as in Kabul city.

percent said they had heard about post-earthquake aid – and views of the U.S. had improved modestly, with 27 percent of Pakistanis giving the U.S. a positive rating, up from 23 percent the previous year. Andrabi and Das (2010) suggest that exposure to foreign assistance had a long-lasting and statistically significant impact on affected villagers' trust of foreigners in the aftermath of the earthquake. However, the authors found that positive perceptions tapered off as distance from the fault line increased, suggesting that the impact was localised among those who benefited directly from the aid or who came from communities that benefited.

At the national level, the goodwill receded quickly. By spring 2007, U.S. favourability had slipped to 15 per cent in Pakistan (Pew Research Center 2007). Similarly, the U.S. received no image boost in 2011, despite providing nearly \$600 million in disaster relief following the 2010 floods. Only 11 percent of Pakistanis offered a favourable opinion of the U.S. in an April 2011 Pew survey – a decline of six percentage points from 2010 (Wike 2012). In an opinion piece commenting on the results of these attitudinal surveys in Pakistan, Richard Wike, Associate Director of Pew Global Attitudes Project, suggests that distrust of American motives and opposition to key elements of U.S. foreign policy may run too deep in Pakistan for humanitarian efforts to have a significant impact over the long term (Ibid). He argues that the lesson for communications strategies in the context of disaster relief efforts is that they are more likely to have a significant effect on public attitudes in countries where there is at least a reservoir of pre-existing goodwill toward the donor country (Ibid).

### 3. Perceptions towards recipient governments

While donor branding aims to improve the views of citizens in aid-receiving countries toward the donor, there is also the possibility that information about the external funding of essential goods and services can influence citizens' views of their own government.

- Some authors have suggested that widespread public information about the presence of donors in a country may signal a lack of competence or willingness on the part of the government to provide basic goods and services, rendering governments unable to make legitimate demands of their citizens (Dietrich et al 2015) For example, if basic goods and services are being clearly funded by foreign aid donors rather than directly through tax revenues, this could undermine the fiscal contract between the state and its citizens according to which states exchange public services for tax receipts. By not being seen to fulfil its obligations within the terms of the tax bargain, the state could lose legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. Through lowering the motivation of citizens to comply with tax regulations, this potential disconnect could lead to a situation where the greater visibility of foreign aid actually undermines the quality of governance in a state (Ibid).
- Guiteras and Mobarak (2014) show in a field experiment that the introduction of subsidies for the construction of sanitation facilities in rural Bangladesh initially increased citizen support for the local government, until they were given information that the subsidies came from an NGO and that the local government played no role in obtaining them. At this point, support for the local government returned to the baseline level.
- Carnegie and Dolan (2015) use survey data to investigate the effect of aid on a government's reputation in the context of responding to natural disasters. They suggest that foreign aid can undermine a recipient government's domestic reputation for competence by weakening the role of the government in public service provision. They also argue that receipt of aid can undermine a state's international reputation for good governance. They demonstrate that



some governments reject foreign aid as a way of signalling their competence and self-sufficiency to the international community. For example, in 2006 Eritrea announced that it would no longer accept foreign aid. A political advisor to Eritrea's president and head of Eritrea's ruling party stated, "We really don't see any need for [aid] ... Africa has within itself the capacity to develop its own economy...We can do it on our own". Yet many analysts have argued that Eritrea is not self-reliant, and in fact desperately needs the aid (Ibid: 2). Carnegie and Dolan (2015) suggest that discreetly delivered aid that aims to build a government's capacity for public service provision may be preferable in some circumstances than clearly branded and highly visible aid, because it will seem less threatening to the recipient government's international standing.

Other studies call into question the extent to which visible foreign aid has a detrimental impact on state-society relations in recipient countries.

- In experimental survey data from India, Dietrich and Winters (2015) found no evidence that favorability ratings for domestic government officials or institutions decreased when individuals received information about the foreign funding of a development project.
- It has been argued that the successful management of relationships with foreign aid donors may in fact help legitimise the state and its institutions. The presence of clearly branded, externally-funded projects can serve as signals of the competence of a local government in providing goods and services to its community. Since many donor-funded development interventions directly target some local communities but not others, and since project implementation usually requires the consent and cooperation of local authorities, citizens might credit their local authorities for bringing a project into their community (Dietrich et al 2015).
- Cruz and Schneider (2014) show how local government officials in the Philippines reaped electoral benefits from the presence of a World Bank-funded and central government-implemented development project. They present qualitative and quantitative evidence that receiving a project significantly increased the re-election prospects of mayors in recipient municipalities. They found that mayors would try to claim credit for projects by visiting the project sites and participating in activities such as ribbon-cutting.
- Sacks (2012) uses multilevel analyses of Afrobarometer survey data to yield support for the argument that service provision by donors and non-state actors can strengthen, rather than undermine, the relationship between citizens and the state.

## 4. Criticisms of branding

**Communications and raised expectations:** Fishstein and Wilder (2012) state that the general consensus amongst the aid community in Afghanistan is that expectations were raised unrealistically high by the public relations and communications strategies of most national and international institutions, particularly in immediate years following 2001. The use of media outlets to highlight the positive actions being taken by donors generated significant cognitive dissonance between what Afghans were told was being done for them, and the tangible results on the ground. Challenges were underplayed and glossed over because they might undercut the positive narrative. According to Fishstein and Wilder (Ibid: 42), this communications strategy helps explain why Afghan survey respondents frequently expressed the view that "nothing has

been done”, in spite of the progress that had been achieved since the Taliban were removed from power.

**Undermines development:** In a report that draws on the work of recent task forces that have examined US relations with Pakistan, Birdsall et al (2012) argue that an overemphasis on branding USAID projects has had perverse impacts on U.S. assistance. Rather than examine a project portfolio and then determine which should be branded and which should not, they suggest that the process often seems to work in reverse: the projects which are ultimately selected are those for which branding is possible. This means that some projects that cannot easily be branded—but are otherwise valuable—have not been pursued, while others that are more easily branded but less valuable often are.

Birdsall et al (2012) argue that this fixation with branding is misguided on two counts. First, it shifts the donor’s objective away from improving long-run development outcomes toward making sure the donor gets credit for what it is doing. Second, branding can be counterproductive in places where the general public are wary of the use of development funds to attempt to buy good will. The authors urge donors to focus less on branding and more on improving the transparency of development efforts, as greater transparency will encourage more care over where money is spent and for what purpose.

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