Bilateral Donors and the Age of the National Interest:

What prospects for challenge by development agencies?

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Abstract/Keywords

Foreign aid agencies represent and champion global development priorities within a donor nation. Increasingly however, these agencies sit within donor governments that are strongly committed to upholding the national interest through their development commitments. This paper is concerned with how bilateral aid agencies manage this tension and how they might continue to serve the altruistic aims of development. The main research question asks if autonomy — or a combination of autonomies — can improve a development agency's ability to defend the humanitarian imperative of development against normative pressures privileging the national interest? By drawing on theories of autonomy within public management literatures, it is possible to identify points of leverage for development agencies where spaces for autonomous preferences and actions remain, as well as sources of limitation where such opportunities are considerably reduced. Six types of autonomy are examined across three donor nations widely perceived as strong performers as donors—Norway, the UK and Sweden. The paper suggests that while the structural autonomy is critical for preserving humanitarian motivations, there are also unexplored opportunities within other autonomous spheres. A multi-dimensional examination of autonomy highlights the varying capacity that development agencies have to resist pressures to strongly nationalise the global development project.

Key words: national interest, aid bureaucracy, donors, development agencies, autonomy, public management

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1. Introduction

The international development agency is an unusual beast. It is charged with delivering assistance to people outside its borders but must do so within government structures whose purpose it is to uphold the national interest. In other words, it must simultaneously be doting mother hen to the wider animal kingdom and defensive lioness to her own pride. This conundrum is at the heart of the challenge of strengthening the development agency in an environment that increasingly frames development in terms of domestic priorities. Dual imperatives challenge development agencies sitting at the crossroads of these disparate norms for aid-giving. How are these tensions balanced? What can their response be?

Our starting point for answering these questions is that the main development agency of a donor country bears significant responsibility towards the welfare of non-nationals. We define a development agency as the primary organisation delegated with responsibility for Official Development Assistance (ODA) or, more colloquially, foreign aid.[1] The purpose of this paper is to understand if it is possible to hold steadfast to ambitious development aims in the post-MDG period as pressures mount on agencies to demonstrate concrete positive returns of aid provision to the donor-nation. To do this, we explore the possibility that the development agency maintains a degree of independence from the norms of national interest. In this case, it is public management that provides a theoretical framework for the analysis that follows, particularly literatures concerned with organisational autonomy. This paper is thus situated within 'the bureaucratic turn' in studies of foreign aid (Arel-Bundock, Atkinson, & Potter, 2015; Bebbington, Guggenheim, Olson, & Woolcock, 2004; Cornell, 2014; Easterly, 2002; Gibson, Andersson, Ostrom, & Shivakumar, 2005; Gulrajani, 2014, 2015; Lewis et al., 2003; Martens, 2005; Mosse, 2005; Pritchett & Woolcock, 2004; Quarles van Ufford, 1988). Describing this flourishing body of literature, Yanguas and Hulme (2015, p. 210, 216) suggest it is partly united in its interest in the administrative constraints inherent to aid bureaucracies. In this paper, a holistic examination of development agencies' autonomy uncovers both the constraints on and opportunities for advancing the ethical imperative of development as at time when it is strongly challenged by national interest norms.

Our hypothesis for the paper is that bilateral development agencies do have some opportunities to preserve a more selfless commitment to development. By examining the different spheres of autonomy of a development agency, one can begin to understand and compare how well adapted an agency is to protect and champion a robust global development agenda from dilution by national prerogatives. Analysis of the various dimensions of autonomy is illustrated through narrative case studies of Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom—all high performing donors but also all susceptible to populist pressures that seek to further domestic interests through development policy. Our findings suggest that there is unevenness among these actors in their ability to challenge the norms of the national interest and that spheres of autonomy provide leverage to a development agency seeking to defend a principled approach to development. Overall, the paper concludes that a nuanced consideration of development agency autonomy may offer some prospects for a development project that is not overwhelmingly colonized by nationalistic ambition.

2. The changing environment for bilateral donors: An age of the national interest

These are challenging times for bilateral donors. Responsibility for Official Development Assistance (ODA) may be a task that unites all development agencies but it is one that is dwindling in importance and popularity. ODA is not only falling relative to other flows of development finance like FDI and remittances, it is also falling in absolute terms, with a 12% real drop in total ODA disbursed between 2014 and 2015 (OECD, 2016). Meanwhile, popular support for development spending diminishes as domestic austerity measures fuel the perception that aid is provided at the expense of the poor at home (Heinrich, Kobayashi,

& Bryant, 2016; Lancaster, 2007). Against a backdrop of widening intra-country inequality, even respectable voices call for foreign aid flows focusing on domestic problems of exclusion rather than exotic locations overseas (Deaton, 2016). Meanwhile, growth rates in many middle-income countries will soon make these states ineligible for concessional ODA flows (Sumner, 2013). Many of these 'emerging powers' possess their own aid programmes, resulting in an enlarged pool of development agencies that increasingly compete with traditional donors for the attention of Southern client states (Kragelund, 2011; Swedlund, 2017).[2]

The working assumption of this paper is that such global trends are shaping the wider normative environment within which the development agency is embedded by fueling domestic political pressures to deliberately exploit aid to promote the national interest. Thus, we subscribe to the view that while the act of aid-giving can be motivated by both altruistic and strategic interests, one of these motivations tends to be in the ascendant at any given moment. This starting point is shared by one of the earliest works to explore the relationship between idealistic and pragmatic motivations for aid:

> Both of these broad motivations for giving aid—to assist development and to promote the interests of the donor—are no doubt present in most aid allocation decisions, and it is to be expected that the balance between the two

> will vary among the different donor countries as well as over time. (Maizels & Nissanke, 1984, p. 880)

Maizels and Nissanke demonstrate empirically that bilateral aid is mainly "donor-oriented rather than development-oriented", even if the relative balance can swing back and forth. Subsequent econometric research has found that geopolitical interests and foreign policy preferences interests are strong determinants of aid allocation patterns (Alesina & Dollar, 2000; Nielsen, 2013; Wang, 1999). Foreign aid enables the pursuit, promotion and defense of the national interests of the donor nation, its expenditure "the price paid for political services rendered or to be rendered" (Morgenthau, 1962, p. 302)

And yet, there is always some variance in the strength of the articulation and instrumental pursuit of aid in the national interest. Donor motives are located within the political economies of donor states and influence temporal and spatial variation in aid policy (Dietrich, 2016; Fuchs, Dreher, & Nunnenkamp, 2014; Lancaster, 2007; Lundsgaarde, 2012). Moreover, constructivist international relations illustrate how motivations for aid-provision are strongly associated with normative configurations in global society. Incentives and structures in the international system interact with moral discourses in domestic political life, to influence the likelihood of ethical stewardship and principled aid engagements (Lumsdaine, 1993).

Lumsdaine creates the possibility for moral motivations for aid-giving, albeit while acknowledging the possibility of shifts in emphasis over time and context (See also Lumsdaine & Schopf, 2007). In tracing the dialectic relationship between humanitarian and strategic interests however, humanitarian motivations may only survive due to a benevolent national interest. For example, in an early interview-based study of fifty American aid officials, Packenham observed that "the *sina qua non* goal and justification of aid is that it be an instrument of foreign policy and justified in terms of the national interest. If other goals and justifications can be added, all the better; if they cannot, the decision to go ahead is forthcoming anyway. In no case, however, does the doctrine justify using aid for humanitarian purposes when justification for national interest is lacking" (Packenhan, 1966, p. 218-219). At some level, the promotion of development will always service the national interest, though the expression of this donor interest may vary in scope, scale and explicitness at any given moment in time. This implies aid-giving can exhibit varying degrees of humanitarian motives.

While the relationship between the national interest and the promotion of humanitarian principles may not be completely zero-sum in nature, neither is it always mutually reinforcing. Indeed, there is a substantial body of evidence suggesting that aid motivated by geopolitical preferences undermines the likelihood of development success and impact, suggesting at least the possibility of tensions and tradeoffs. For example, national imperatives are shown to affect aid allocation by misdirecting funds to states and sectors on non-development grounds (Girod, 2008; Reddy & Minoiu, 2009; Steele, 2011). Bilateral aid that rewards particular political positions, for example voting behaviour in the UN Security Council, is demonstrably less effective at achieving development impact (Dreher et al., 2016). Meanwhile, where donors' interests are less salient, it is shown aid recipients have greater incentives to achieve robust development outcomes (Girod, 2012). Overall, donor motives are strongly shown to influence aid's effectiveness, with geostrategic motives shown to be ill-disposed to development impact (Kilby & Dreher, 2010; Stone, 2010).

If humanitarian and national interests are the yin and yang of development cooperation, where does the balance sit in current contemporary policy space? It is a key argument of the paper that balance has shifted in the post-MDG period to service donor interests above developmental ones, creating a fine balancing act for development agencies.

If the national interest is a permanent undercurrent at play in foreign aid, there are times and places where it has certainly been diminished. For example, the period between the Cold War and the War on Terror is viewed as a low point for the influence of foreign policy objectives on development (Fleck & Kilby, 2010; Stone, 2010). For many observers, the new millennium also marked a high watermark for developmental motivations, oriented towards the mission of global poverty eradication (Maxwell, 2003; Noel, 2006; Payne, 2006). The re-discovery of global poverty as an area of common convergent international concern resulted in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), an integrative framework that came to embody the benign humane face of the aid project. While some suggested this period represented a continuity of neo-liberal prescriptions and intrusions linked to the national interest (Craig & Porter, 2003; Porter & Craig, 2004), there is also basis for thinking the global poverty agenda marked a significant shift from the conception and deployment of aid during the Washington Consensus era (Mawdsley, Savage, & Kim, 2013).

While the global aid community continues to stress the importance of poverty, and increasingly inequality, development cooperation is beginning to occupy a different place within national foreign policy narratives. Notwithstanding a global agenda that is still defined by the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 and the predicaments of fragile and conflict-affected states, within national donor contexts the dominant frame is the consistency between resolving poverty overseas and achieving domestic imperatives of security, political influence and economic advancement. The potential for win-wins is now articulated under the banner of advancing the 'mutual interests' of both donor and recipient nations. Nowhere is this most obvious than in contemporary policy interest in a 'global public goods' (GPGs) agenda that is perceived to advance collectively-held interests (Ahluwalia, Summers, Birdsall, Morris, & Directors, 2016; Cepparulo & Giuriato, 2016). Interest in GPGs, however, potentially camouflages donor nationalism in development under the logic of 'enlightened self-interest' (Anand, 2004). Unlike the previous MDG era, this nationalistic orientation now serves as the subtext, if not the explicit rationale, for bilateral aid.[3] This growing explicitness and acceptability of foreign aid as an instrument of domestic interests suggest a potential shift in the pendulum within contemporary development policy.

Of course, it is *possible* to service a robust moral and ethical basis for aid even if framed in terms of the advancement of mutual interests (See Lumsdaine, 1993; Lumsdaine & Schopf, 2007; Packenhan, 1966). Paul Collier makes the most recent attempt to defend the moral and ethical basis for aid in the national interests (Collier, 2016). For him, compulsory tax-based financed aid can only be ethical if it fulfills basic moral obligations to non-nationals that are widely accepted by people living in donor countries. Because reciprocity is a fundamental basis for generosity, Collier suggests it is natural for obligations to citizens to trump those to non-citizens (where no option for reciprocity exists). He identifies only two cases where moral obligations to those overseas are legitimate: in the case of immediate duty of rescue to address *life-threatening situations* and in cases where there is duty to rescue from *mass despair*, where long-term prospects for citizens are weak. In those instances, where aid can address the duty to rescue in either dimension *and* serve the interest of the donor, the mutual interest basis for aid is ethically defensible. This is because as long as the efficacy of the aid in reducing despair is maintained, the addition of a benefit to the donor is a pure gain. Nonetheless, because aid in the mutual interest is susceptible to donor moral hazard and may dilute the effectiveness of duty to rescue (particularly when such duty might be based on more charitable motivations), aid motivated by mutual interests has the potential to be less effective than aid with a more selfless orientation. Thus, enlightened self-interest runs the risk of never being completely benign.

The rise of a 'mutual interest' paradigm within the global development field provides an interesting moment to examine the ways the tension between national interest motives and humanitarian impulses unfolds within development agencies. How these actors navigate these pressures— including their ability to protect, defend and advance alternative conceptions of development—is the subject of the rest of the paper.

3. The mandates of development agencies: preserving humanitarian altruism

Offices and ministries of government have a mandate to serve the interests of the state/sovereign. In most liberal democracies, there is often a constitutional mandate to do so. For example, in Sweden, the Instrument of Government (1975) comprises most state administrative authorities, including Government Offices.[4] Similarly, in Norway a constitution vests power in the Executive Branch of Government that includes the Council of State, headed by the Prime Minister, seventeen Ministries and the Office of the Prime Minister. In other countries, departmental mandates lack a legislative basis. For example, in the UK prerogative powers of the Crown are devolved to government ministers who have the freedom to re-sculpt and alter departmental structures through 'machinery of government' changes (White & Dunleavy, 2010: 10). Thus, most government administrative units share a common loyalty and single-minded commitment to the state's priorities and welfare.

The only administrative exception to this, I argue, is the bilateral development agency. Here, in addition to accountabilities to citizen-taxpayers, important stakeholders also lie beyond national boundaries, whether intended beneficiaries in developing countries or their governments. Unlike other major administrative units of government that define their roles in terms of advancement of national welfare and interests, development agencies are vested with responsibility towards non-nationals in developing countries. While this orientation may not be constitutionally mandated, it is nonetheless implicit in the creation and organisation of a development agency and an obligation that exists irrespective of the pathologies and failings that agencies may or may not possess in materialising their 'good intentions' (Birdsall, 2004; Easterly, 2002). As others have argued, development agencies sit at the crossroads of dual accountabilities to domestic and foreign principals (Arel-Bundock et al., 2015; Martens, 2005). However, with the lack of formal feedback (i.e. through voting) between non-national principals and the donor state, there are also some 'impossible' accountability geometries that development agencies navigate (Renzio, 2016; Severino, 2010). Multiple accountabilities create space for the development agency to play principals off one another, generating ambiguity and room to act independently of national strategies and political directives. When non-conformist behaviour of development agencies is observed, or explained in contemporary political science, it is predominantly by relying on this model of nested principal-agency relationships.

Though development agencies may have the legitimacy to champion the cause of global development for the world's poor, this has to be understood against the backdrop of the shrinking mandate of ODA itself. Nowadays, non-aid policies are viewed as more germane for the achievement of development than taxpayer-financed aid (Roodman, 2006). Trade, climate change, global remittances, migration policy, technological change, tax policy, emergency relief, military assistance: all these are seen to be alternative and more effective pathways to improving living standards of the poor. And yet, expertise and experience in these sectors lie somewhat beyond the purview of the traditional aid agency, within sectoral line ministries, or even further afield in the private sector. As the salience and relevance of non-aid policy arenas grows, the status and profile mandate of aid-oriented ministries potentially diminishes.[5]

As the status of development agencies erodes, this can make it even less likely that they will be called upon to steer policy coherence within whole-of-government fora. Moreover, even if asked to exercise whole-of-government leadership, it is only an exceptional development agency with standing and credibility that can do so effectively. This is because an agency must be able to convene and coordinate inter-agency activities, broker compromises, arbitrate disputes, and generally defend the deployment of resources to advance the moral basis for development spending. In most cases, such profile and standing is lacking and policy coherence easily slips into a euphemism for subordinating development to national prerogatives and priorities.

In the contemporary post-MDG period, the ability of development agencies to enable a donor's principled commitment to global development is challenged both by the rise of the national interest and the potential for usurpation of the agenda by other governmental actors. The rest of this paper examines whether resistance might be possible for these agencies however, and if a plausible instrument of defense is an enhancement in an agency's autonomy.

4. The analysis of autonomy: a bureaucratic opportunity

Public management has long prized autonomy as an analytical construct, albeit within two different schools of thought. Among those that seek to insert private styles of management into public organisations (also known as New Public Management (NPM)), autonomy is a conduit for superior performance, especially when there are appropriate, well-designed inducements. If the right things can be measured and agents can be incentivized to deliver, autonomy will deliver the goods of higher performance (Hood, 2005; Pollitt, 1990). With the wrong or perverse incentives, as in the case of disbursement incentives inside development agencies, autonomy will be a source of negative unintended consequences (Birdsall, 2004; Easterly, 2002; Yanguas & Hulme, 2015).

Meanwhile, network and open systems theorists emphasise the importance of delegated autonomy to deal with complex and uncertain environments (Burns and Stalker, 1961; Drazin and van de Ven, 1985; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Perrow, 1967; Sauser et al., 2009). Autonomy is the trigger for solutions that 'best-fit' the problems of hand, a source of higher motivation (Galletta, Portoghese, and Battistelli, 2011; Spector, 1986), tacit learning (Hurley, Tomas, Hult, Abrahamson, & Maxwell, 1988; Nonaka & Lewin, 2010) and greater responsiveness to changing circumstances (Honig, 2014a; Rasul & Rogger, 2013). Autonomy allows development agencies to embrace 'problem-driven iterative adaptive' approaches that are flexible and adaptable (Andrews, 2014; Andrews, Pritchett, Woolcock, & Andrews, 2012).

While both schools of thought have tended to highlight the benefits of autonomy, it is also recognised that autonomy can also be a source of poor performance, malfeasance and unintended consequences. Reduced controls on behaviour certainly offer the prospect that freedom is exploited for ineffectual or nefarious ends. This had led some to talk about the importance of bounded autonomy or structured flexibility that might frame independent action (Brinkerhoff & Ingle, 1989; Gulrajani, 2014). Notwithstanding the potential for autonomous behaviour to challenge conventional thinking about public accountability, on balance autonomy can be advantageous for organisational performance.

Autonomy can be defined as freedom from external control and influence. And yet, it can operate on a range of different levels: inter-organisationally, intra-organisationally and individually (Gulrajani & Honig, 2016; Verhoest, Peters, Bouckaert, & Verschuere, 2004). For example, a development agency can be more or less autonomous *vis-à-vis* its political principals in its external environment. A field unit can be more or less autonomous *vis-à-vis* headquarters or an individual can be more or less autonomous *vis-à-vis* supervisors. A second distinction can be made in terms of the scale of discretionary power and its scope. (Verhoest, Peters, Bouckaert, & Veschure, 2004; Verhoest et al., 2004). For example, are decisions taken without advice, on the basis of consultation, on the basis of a proposal, collectively or on the basis of widely accepted rules and regulations? A third distinction can be made based on whether an agent has the capacity to develop autonomous preferences or the capacity to translate preferences into action. This results in a distinction between autonomy of *will* and autonomy of *action* that is relevant to assessments of scope, in particular (Ege, 2015: 7).

Verhoest et al (2004) offer a holistic taxonomy of autonomy that captures these various dimensions in its design. In their framework, six types of autonomy are examined—legal, structural, financial, interventional, managerial and policy. Given our empirical interest in the development agency, each dimension in Table 1 is presented with this perspective in mind.

Structural autonomy is about the freedom that a development agency has with respect to formal structures in government, including other government departments, the executive branch and legislative assemblies. It is the basis for donor governance and provides the backdrop for the bureaucratic structures of accountability to national principals. *Financial autonomy* refers to the freedom to negotiate and manage fiscal allocations. This can provide the development agency with the freedom to choose instruments and make allocations based on needs rather than diplomatic interests. *Legal autonomy* is when a development agency has formal status associated with global development interests enshrined in a legislative act. This can enable the protection and championship of humanitarian orientations in the face of domestic pressures. *Interventional autonomy* is the freedom from excessive reporting requirements, evaluation and audit processes, both internally as well as externally to other governmental stakeholders. The desire to manage performance is at the heart of all audit and evaluation processes and is motivated by the desire for political accountability to domestic stakeholders. And yet, an excess of reporting mechanisms for donors can undermine their credibility as it is suggestive of performance problems and/or a lack of confidence in the development agent, whether or not these concerns are warranted.   Moreover, excessive reporting can actually detract from a results agenda to the extent that they can sap staff motivation, increase duplication and inefficiency, skew priorities and incentivize gaming.

Policy autonomy is the freedom to define, defend and convene the priorities for global development activities within inter-governmental fora. Such independence can protect against the exclusive servicing of domestic interests through development vehicles. *Managerial autonomy* permits the exercise of judgment by individuals closest to the problem to either act or refrain from action (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Lipsky, 1980). A growing body of evidence suggests that such autonomy can result in better judgments about programme design, project management and revision, incentivize higher quality staff, facilitate innovation and result in adaptations that enact humanitarian principles (Gulrajani 2010; Honig 2014). In term of scope, policy and managerial autonomy, empower capabilities to *decide* certain courses of action and allows for the formation of distinct preferences. Legal, structural, financial and interventional autonomy, in contrast, *enable* action by suggesting exemptions from formal constraints and the actual ability to convert preferences into action (Verhoest et al., 2004; Verhoest et al., 2004).

To date, academic consideration of autonomy in development agencies is mainly reduced to two levels of analysis: bureaucratic or managerial. For example, bureaucratic autonomy by US development agencies is shown to act as a firewall against excessive Presidential influence and permitted development needs to trump and diplomatic prerogatives (Arel-Bundock et al., 2015). Meanwhile, managerial autonomy serves as a critical vehicle for effective project management in the field, especially where there is greater environmental volatility, less potential for task routinization and high uncertainty (Honig, 2014a, 2014b, 2016). In contrast, Verhoest's typology offers the prospect of a holistic and multidimensional understanding of autonomy. In this paper, we apply the typology to see if it can help us understand a development agency's autonomy to defend and enact humanitarian norms of global development notwithstanding normative pressures to implement the national interest. In this regard, this paper is complementary to Arel-Bundock et al. (2015) study that examined the possibility of challenging the geo-strategic framing of US development policy, albeit the latter has an exclusive focus on the structural autonomy of American aid-giving.[6] Applying a multi-dimensional framework allows for the identification of alternative points of leverage for a development agency beyond structural autonomy, which is often legally circumscribed or too expensive to contemplate. The framework highlights the potential that all autonomy is not created equal, as well as the possibility of interaction effects among various spheres of autonomy.

Table 1 Dimensions of development agency autonomy: definitions and levels of analysis

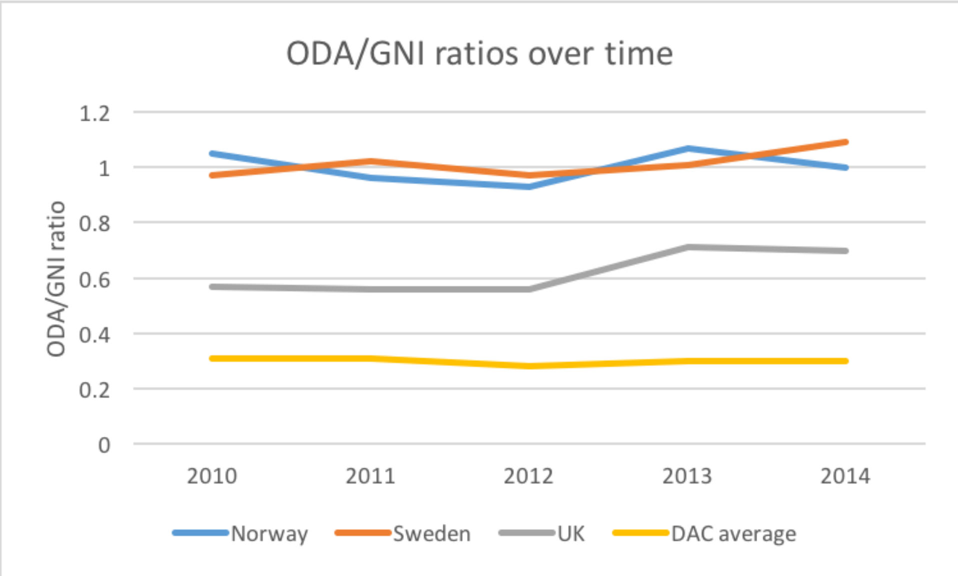
Dimension of autonomy	**Level of analysis**	**Scope of autonomy**	**Definition**
Structural	Inter-organisational	Action	Freedom from lines of hierarchy to other government actors
Financial	Inter-organisational	Action	Freedom to negotiate and manage the financial allocation for development
Interventional	Inter-organisational Intra-organisational	Action	Freedom from reporting requirements, evaluation and audit provisions
Legal	Inter-organisational Intra-organisational	Action	The development agency has a legal personality associated with humanitarian interests enshrined in law
Policy	Inter-organisational Intra-organisational	Will	Freedom to define and adapt development policy
Managerial	Individual	Will	Freedom to choose and use inputs for development activities

Adapted from Verkoest et. al (2004), Ege (2012)

5.Methods of analysis

To explore the ways the tensions between the national interest and humanitarian motives might be navigated by a development agency, we examine three cases where we would expect significant a priori support for humanitarian principles. The UK, Norway and Sweden are all ranked as strong performers on a variety of indices measuring donor commitment to development. For example, on the Centre for Global Development's annual donor ranking — the Commitment to Development Index (CDI) — Sweden ranked 2nd and Norway ranked 3rd overall in 2015, whereas on the specific aid component they were third and fifth respectively. The UK ranked 7th overall, and fourth on the aid component. The performance of all three donors on the CDI index has been consistently high, with all having ODA/GNI ratios regularly above the DAC average (Figure 1). Beyond the size of their aid portfolios, all three countries have ranked well on various measures of aid quality (Easterly & Pfutze, 2008; Knack, Rogers, & Eubank, 2011). Sweden and Norway are lauded as 'exceptional Nordics' that have prioritized poverty eradication, social investment, good governance, democracy and human rights and investment in multilateral institutions (Selberik & Nygaard, 2006).

Figure 1. ODA/GNI ratios over time across cases



Across these cases, it is worth underlining the different development agents subject to analysis. In the UK, the development agency with primary responsibility for development policy and administration is the Department for International Development (DfID). DfID was created in 1997 from an office in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and has independent Ministerial status. In 2013, it spent 87.8% of British ODA.[7] In the case of Norway, the primary agent is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (N-MFA), where policy and operational responsibility for international aid and development has been consolidated. Most Norwegian development co-operation is administered through the N-MFA and its embassies. The Ministry oversees three agencies that also administer Norwegian ODA: Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), the Norwegian Peace Corps and

Norfund, a wholly state-owned development finance institution. In the case of Sweden, it is more problematic to identify the primary development agent. Efforts to centralise policy setting functions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (S-MFA) have been controversial. A technical directorate—the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida)—continues to have responsibilities and influence that belie its formal status as an implementation agency. Sida was responsible for 48% of Sweden's ODA in 2013 (OECD, 2013: 63). As a result of the ongoing dilemma concerning the division of labour between these two Swedish actors, we approach the Swedish case by examining relative autonomy from the perspective of both Sida and the S-MFA.

Three case study narratives are constructed per country. These narratives were written based on semi-structured interviews with staff, observers and stakeholders of DfID, Sida/S-MFA and the N-MFA. Interviews lasted approximately one hour each and focused on obtaining information on each sphere of an agency's autonomy. Interviews took place in 2010 (UK and Norway only) 2012 (UK/Norway and Sweden) and in 2014 (all three donors based in the Vietnam field office). A snowball sampling technique was adopted to identify appropriate interviewees in each donor (at headquarters only). A total of 21 interviews were conducted in person as well as by telephone. These were supplemented by a review of published, official and grey literatures—historical and contemporary—that dealt with the management and administration of these development agencies. Publications included

OECD-DAC peer reviews, internal strategy planning documents, policy statements, academic articles and speeches. Finally, an analysis of media articles published in two major daily newspapers per country was undertaken to trace more recent developments between 2013-2016.[8]

In all cases, a narrative was drafted using the combination of raw data gathered. The goal was to become "intimately familiar with each case as a stand-alone entity" (Eisenhardt, 1989: 540). In order to capture longitudinal dimensions, we sought to conduct interviews at three moments over a four-year period. In terms of interview method, our questions were broadly framed and dealt with the general environment for these agencies and the nature of their organisation's response. Using both these reflections and our documentary analysis, the goal was to build a narrative that could access both the formal, factual and perceived dimensions of autonomy (Koen Verhoest et al., 2004: 17). Given the small sample, the ability to generalize from these findings is obviously constrained. Nonetheless, the case narratives provide insight into the spheres of agency autonomy that might protect from and challenge a nationalistic framing of their mandate, highlighting how the tensions between humanitarian and national interest motivations might unfold in the context of different spheres of agency autonomy.

6. An examination of development agencies' autonomy: Case narratives

While Norway, Sweden and the UK are all strong performers, they are also not immune from pressures to instrumentalise development for national gain. The New UK Aid Strategy, singlehandedly written by the Treasury for DfID, now states that the objective of UK is to tackle 'global challenges....that directly threaten British interests' (Chancellor of the Exchequer, 2015). The promotion of British trade and investment opportunities, the end of general budget support, greater focus on fragile states and GPGs, and more aid spending by other governmental departments all mark a dramatic shift in orientation from a previous poverty-focused era (Payne, 2006). There has been a noticeable and gradual dilution in DfID's standing and profile over the period of this research, even prior to the publication of this new strategy. In Sweden, development policy has also looked to advance domestic interests in recent times. This shift is best capture by a journalist writing: " More aid money has gone to refugees in Sweden, salaries to Swedish ministers, Swedish entrepreneurs, Swedish municipalities, Swedish think tanks and institutes and Swedish embassies. This increased friction between idealism and reality has resulted in greater complexity, confusion and many failures." [9] Unspoken but prevalent national interests, largely driven by the global refugee crises, have impinged on Sweden's target of spending 1% of GDP on aid. Meanwhile, in Norway the turn to the national interest is partly camouflaged by continuous growth in its ODA budget. Nonetheless, several proposed cuts to development spending on civil society, human rights and multilateral institutions underline a stronger domestic orientation to development policy. Growing earmarking of its multilateral portfolio, aid expenditures on global security threats, the rapid growth of private sector engagements (particularly in middle-income countries) and greater expenditure of ODA in-country (not only for the reception but also the physical deportation of refugees) point to an increased desire for aid spending to service the national interest (Hansen & Gjefsen, 2015: 13). This section assesses the primary development agent's autonomy in six spheres, with a view to understanding where potential points of leverage may exist to challenge pressures to conform to national interest norms. In doing so, the aim is to highlight the differential capacity among these agencies to preserve a more ethical foundation for development cooperation.

(1) The UK

The ***structural*** autonomy of the UK's Department for International Development enables a strong presence at the heart of government policy processes. Created in 1997 with dual responsibility for development policy and implementation, DfID has had senior cabinet-level representation in the person of a Secretary of State for International Development. Through its Secretary of State, DfID possesses a seat on various Cabinet committees, including the National Security Council (NSC), which allows it to defend development from a position of strength (Lockwood et al., 2010: 10). The creation of the International Development Select Committee (IDC) accompanied its separation from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in 1997. Although this is a cross-party Parliamentary committee established to scrutinize DfID's policies and expenditures, in practice, the IDC has been a strong champion of DfID and a vigorous development agenda. DfID is the only development agency in the DAC to possess a separate governmental department with full ministerial status (Gulrajani, 2015). A recent IDC enquiry asking whether DfID's structural autonomy should be altered weighed heavily on the side of a negative answer (International Development Select Committee, 2015).

Unlike its structural autonomy, DfID's ***financial*** autonomy is coming under some strain. Every three to four years, the UK Government sets out ministerial budget allocations in Comprehensive Spending Reviews (CSR). The CSR provides a medium-term framework for national budgetary spending. The Treasury and Parliament are the main gatekeepers for DfID's financial allocation and spending authority. In order to draw down and consume these funds, DfID must be authorised by Parliament through the Mains Estimate.[10] Beyond Parliamentary and Treasury oversight, DfID has benefitted from considerable financial autonomy. Once funds are allocated, DfID has autonomy to spend over the length of the CSR. This allows it to plan for longer-term time horizons, which can provide aid predictability for recipients. Financial rules also provide DfID with greater end-of-year flexibility, as unspent funds can be re-profiled (with approval) without being deducted from the following year's budget allocation. This can dis-incentivize "spending splurges and poor resources use" (van den Noord, 2002: 16). In 2010, DfID benefitted from a ring-fence of the aid budget which has remained in place. Moreover, the government subsequently legally bound the UK to spend 0.7 per cent of gross national income (GNI) as ODA.

And yet, against the backdrop of austerity and the 0.7% ODA/GNI target, DfIDs financial autonomy is potentially threated. Cash-strapped departments seek access to aid funds that were previously allocated to DfID in order to mitigate cuts to their own budgets, putting pressure on the definition of ODA itself.[11] Nevertheless, pressures to meet the 0.7% target have also resulted in DfID being asked to disburse larger sums at faster rates.[12] In this way, the adoption of this input target has reduced some of DfID's space to manage its financial allocation, as it biases allocations to initiatives that can be booked quickly like contributions to multilateral institutions.[13] With the New UK Aid Strategy, it is thought that up to 25% of ODA spending will be shifted to other government departments.[14] An expanded cross-government Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) managed by the FCO and overseen by the NSC, as well as a new cross-governmental Prosperity Fund led by the NSC, is shifting financial responsibilities out of DfID. Notwithstanding, DfID is expected to remain the UK's primary channel for ODA.

Legal autonomy exists in the UK, where the International Development Act (2002) is a legislated mandate that aid spending must contribute to poverty reduction and have the explicit purpose of furthering sustainable development or promoting human welfare (2002). Furthermore, the Act designates DfID as the lead ministry for carrying out this legislative mandate (OECD 2008, p. 5). While the Act does not explicitly forbid the tying of aid or aid that furthers foreign policy, trade or national security concerns, this legal framework prevents these priorities from overwhelming the development agenda (Burall, White et al. 2009, p. 16-17, 21, 25; Lockwood, Mulley et al. 2010 p. 69). Legal autonomy exists at the behest of the Secretary of State who can make 'subjective assessments' of what might contribute to poverty reduction. Some legal scholars suggest this shelters aid spending from legal review and is a questionable ' legal backbone of the aid relationship' (McAuslan as quoted in Manji, 2016, p. 657). The same questions are also raised of the legislation of the 0.7% ODA/GNI target.

A number of ***interventional*** mechanisms exist in the UK. Inter-governmental reporting to the IDC and the Public Accounts Committee are two of the most important interventions for DfID. The National Audit Office, an independent agency reporting to Parliament on the use of public funds by government bodies, also monitors DfID on an annual basis, in addition to ad hoc value-for-money audits. At the Executive, the Cabinet Office assesses DfID's overall administrative quality in Departmental Improvement Plans, formerly Capability Reviews.[15] In 2011, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) was set up to assess effectiveness and value for money of DfID programmes, and increasingly other government departments spending ODA. The value for money imperative has only grown in the new UK Aid Strategy in a bid to "cut waste, introduce greater transparency and subject aid to robust independent scrutiny" (Chancellor of the Exchequer, 2015). At the level of project and programme design, the auditing imperative in DfID is expressed through the 'Business Case model' where the chief objective is to demonstrate a project's value for money (Yanguas & Hulme, 2015, p. 213). Ex post assessments occur through DfID's evaluation unit that is regularly scrutinising or contracting out assessments of DfID's performance.

The last DAC peer review of the UK indicated that interventional mechanisms are now overlapping, burdensome and potentially cost effective, especially for field offices (OECD, 2014, p. 79-80) Recently, there has been an attempt to rationalise assessments guiding DfID programme delivery through a simplified list of 'Smart Rules' (DfID, 2016). Although DfID interviewees explained the multiplicity of reporting requirements as the cost of a ring-fenced budget, there was limited clarity on the ways interventional mechanisms reinforce each other to generate real gains in performance, efficiency and accountability. Indeed, if anything most accepted it was the lack of confidence and suspicions about DfID that motivated prolific monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

The exercise of ***policy*** autonomy by DfiD has dwindled considerably over the last five years. It used to be that DfID would set explicit policy objectives in its Public Service Agreements (PSAs). Agreed with the Treasury, these were contracts on both DfID's unilateral and joint policy goals and targets. For example, the 2005-2008 PSA stipulated that at least 90% of DfID's bilateral funding would be destined for low-income countries (OECD, 2006, p. 15). Joint PSA targets with FCO, the Ministry of Defense and the Department of Trade and Industry its high standing in inter-governmental engagements. DfID underlined the size of its whole-of-government ambitions when it wrote in its 2009 White Paper "We will strive to lead *the world* in policy coherence." And yet nowadays policy autonomy and a strong convening role at the heart of government would appear unrealistic. Recent evaluations suggest DfID's capacity as arbitrator of serious inter-governmental policy conflicts is quite weak, as is its policy vision for development (OECD 2014; Committee 2015, p. 16). Opportunities for policy coherence tend to be exploited only when mutual interest can be guaranteed, for example on global health or climate change, rather than policies restricting arms sales or regulating global finance (OECD 2014, p. 26). As the ODA budget shifts to other departments as per the new UK Aid Strategy, this encroaches on DfID's ability to embed its preferences in policy. A recent report from the IDC hinted at DfID's lack of influence at the heart of government , particularly on matters of national security, and raised questions about whether it merits standalone ministerial status (Committee, 2015, p. 3).[16]

While the scope and scale of ***managerial*** autonomy in field offices in DfID may have fallen, DfID remains a decentralised organisation capable of delivering programmes in a "flexible and autonomous way" (OECD, 2006, 2014). Decision-making powers remain "in the hands of those closest to the programme" and the role of headquarters staff is articulated as supporting those in the field. Heads of offices have a tremendous ability to drive the analytical focus of activities, staffing and overall operations. A lead advisor on a project has the final say on the development and presentation of the business case for a given project and possesses the strongest incentives for a project to disburse (Yanguas & Hulme, 2015, p. 213). Nevertheless, there have been restrictions placed on the scale of staff autonomy, for example with greater oversight over staff spending and reduction in flexible country programmable aid. Ministers must now approve programmes above GBP 5 million (whereas previously this ceiling was GBP 20 million), with cascading downward effects for expenditure authorities by Head of Country Offices and operational staff. Moreover, there is an increase in external delegation of authorities as an increasing number of DfID's operations are outsourced to contractors (often UK-based companies despite a commitment to untied aid), which comes at the cost of DfID's ability to make critical decisions about aid delivery (ICAI, 2013).[17]

Overall, this case narrative suggests that while DfID may have considerable structural autonomy, it is increasingly constrained in other dimensions. Most worryingly, the policy and managerial autonomy it had to determine and act on self-defined preferences is disappearing. Though DfID is increasingly on the defensive, its legal autonomy may provide some leverage to challenge the national interest imperative that can counterbalance its decline in autonomy in other spheres. In particular, the International Development Act (2002), notwithstanding its limitations, provides a safeguard against the dilution of its poverty mandate and the more egregious uses of ODA to service political and commercial priorities.

(b) Sweden

Structural autonomy is divided in Sweden**.** "Dualism" has defined the Swedish politico-administrative system for centuries and rests on the constitutional separation of policy setting and implementation functions. The implication is a strict division of labour between ministries, headed by ministers, and agencies headed by top civil servants (Niklasson & Pierre, 2010; Yesilkagit & Christensen, 2010). This means that Swedish politicians are not strictly political executives (as in parliamentary democracies) as they lack full control over implementation. This has traditionally empowered their implementing agencies. Thus, Sweden has evolved a 'living Constitution' that accepts agencies can and do play a role in policy formulation, and where informal and frequent contact is expected between ministries and agencies. This structural relation characterises the one between the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (S-MFA).

The S-MFA is headed by a politically appointed minister of foreign affairs, with a minister for international development, minister of trade and a secretary of state for foreign affairs all serving under her. Both Sida and the S-MFA are expected to be formally held accountable to Parliament through reports to the Foreign Affairs Committee (OECD, 2013b: 94). In 2009, financial mis-management and corruption in Sida resulted in the sacking of its Director General and triggered discussion of 'comprehensive structural problems' in the Swedish aid system.[18] As a remedial measure, a governing board with full oversight powers over Sida and directly accountable to the Swedish Government was appointed in 2010. Meanwhile, the S-MFA sought to centralise its powers over its executive agency and build its internal capacity for development administration (OECD, 2011). Nevertheless, a leaked internal report on the MFA's capacity to administer Swedish aid was highly critical of its efforts.[19] This resulted in calls for Sida to take over the full role of administering Swedish aid, including both policy and implementation functions.[20] Against such an uncertain backdrop, structural autonomy is shared and constrained for both Sida and the S-MFA.

Although both Sida and the S-MFA are constrained by Parliament in their ***financial*** allocation to some degree, the Government's draft development budget is informed by inputs from both. Sweden's development expenditures must be approved through an annual Parliamentary appropriations process. Annual appropriations are presented to Parliament containing broad guidelines for financial spending, while the autumn Budget Bill provides detailed proposals on the allocation of government expenditures. In 2014, the S-MFA held three expenditure areas: international cooperation, international development cooperation, and international trade and promotion of trade and investment. Once the budget is agreed, the S-MFA provides annual instructions to Sida through an Ordinance with Instructions. These are annual appropriations directions as well as decisions on policies, strategies and guidelines, including the allocation of funds to different sectors and geographies. Thus, Sida's financial autonomy is limited by the MFA that can stipulate the size of Sida's allocation, where this money should be spent and what constitutes appropriate mechanisms for spending.

Similar to the UK, Sweden has strong ***legal*** foundation for international development cooperation (Oden & Wohlgemuth, 2007). In 1962, a Government bill defined improving the standard of living of poor people as the primary driver of Swedish development cooperation. This objective has remained relatively consistent over the years. An update in 2004 restated this principle alongside the importance of policy coherence and coordination, making Sweden one of the first donors to legally commit to a whole-of-government framework for development. The fight against poverty is at the core of Sweden's legal mandate and formulated to be applicable to all areas of foreign policy, including trade, defense and migration (Hudson & Jonsson, 2009). This mandate is meant to span both Sida and the S-MFA, and in this regard, provides an autonomous space of action for enacting a humanitarian logic.

A wide range of ***interventional*** mechanisms impinge upon both Sida and the S-MFA. Sweden's new aid policy framework also has results measurement and management at its heart (Government of Sweden, 2014). Interventional mechanisms included National Audit reports, annual performance reports by the S-MFA and Sida to Parliament, independent development evaluations, and internal monitoring and evaluation mechanisms within both Sida and the S-MFA (OECD, 2013b, p. 87-88). In the wake of Sida sacking its Director General in 2010, Sweden's Independent Agency for Development Evaluation (SADEV) was closed and replaced by an Expert Group on Aid Studies (EBA) that now serves as principal evaluator of Swedish development activities. While neither Sida nor the S-MFA are exempt from interventional oversight, there is some indication that the S-MFA has greater capacity than Sida to side-step evaluation findings (OECD, 2013b, p. 90).

The balance of ***policy*** autonomy lies with S-MFA. Nonetheless, there has been some re-engagement by Sida's in policy formulation since the 2009 controversy that resulted in the sacking of the Director General and budget cuts that purged Sida staff with longstanding expertise and knowledge.[21] While the S-MFA does have considerable policy autonomy, it is also constrained by the policy autonomy that is simultaneously held by Sida. Nonetheless, S-MFA has primary responsibility for policy coherence, a signature issues in Sweden, and coordinates and convenes focal points across all ministries of government. S-MFA was also responsible for the drafting of the 2014 Aid Policy Framework which is meant to orient the entire government apparatus.[22]

Sweden has traditionally been a flexible and innovative donor where programme officers have ***managerial*** leeway to develop activities in line with local needs. Sida had traditionally possessed this autonomy as the implementer of Swedish development policy. It has approximately 25% of staff in the field and aims to increase this number. About 60% of country offices have full financial delegation which allows the Head of Development Cooperation (Sida appointees) to decide on commitments of up to US$ 7.5 million within Sida's country budget allocations (OECD, 2013b, p. 65). However, negative audits and evaluations have contributed to greater risk aversion in the organisation and acted as a barrier to managerial autonomy. New government legislation on risk and internal controls in all Swedish departments and agencies has increased the number of comptrollers in the organisation. In the field, Sida delegates its authority to the ambassador, and Sida staff are increasingly restricted by S-MFA rules and reporting requirements even if they appoint Heads of Development Cooperation.

In summary, in the case of Sweden, structural autonomy is a contested space between the S-MFA and Sida. In this regard, the Swedish case lends some support to those who would suggest integration, rather than separation, of policy and implementation functions in a single development agency is better for donor performance (Faure, Long, & Prizzon, 2015; Gulrajani, 2015). On balance, it appears that Sida is restricted in terms of its financial, interventional, policy and managerial autonomy, certainly more so than the S-MFA. Challenging national interest pressures will thus rely heavily on legal stipulations that aid support policy coherence and poverty reduction to which both Sida and the S-MFA subscribe. And yet, Sida does have some recourse to autonomy deriving from structural, policy and managerial spheres from which resistance to national interest norms might also emerge. From this perspective, the separation of policy and implementation functions actually enables Sida with the space and power to defend a robust global orientation to development cooperation.

(c) Norway

The ***structural*** autonomy of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (N-MFA) from other governmental departments is considerable. Prior to 2004, the technical directorate NORAD could be described as the primary development agent in Norway. Independent and at arm's length from government, it was responsible for bilateral and long-term aid, with the N-MFA dealing with international institutions and emergency relief. Since a 2004 public sector modernization reform, the N-MFA has held primary responsibility for bilateral development cooperation. NORAD's mandate has shrunk to cover technical advisory work to the N-MFA, evaluation, quality assurance and grant administration (Gulrajani, 2010, 2014; Lægreid, Dyrnes Nordø, & Rykkja, 2013; OECD, 2013a). In this re-organisation, the N-MFA sought to strengthen both its development policy setting capacity and administrative competencies, particularly within its network of embassies. Up until 2012, the N-MFA was presided over by three Ministers, of which a Minister of International Development was accountable for the bulk of development-related activities. In 2013, the position of the Minister of Development ceased to exist and folded into the formal responsibilities of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The N-MFA also has considerable structural autonomy from Parliament.

Several interviewees commented that structural autonomy of the N-MFA constrained Norway's ability to champion aid policies that did not converge with Norwegian national commercial and geopolitical goals.

Financial autonomy of the N-MFA is limited by the Ministry of Finance that is responsible for presenting a draft budget for consideration by Parliament. The Government, however, takes pains to consult embassies in drafting its budget. The N-MFA's internal allocation is debated by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense prior to approval by Parliament. Within the budget envelope of the MFA, development cooperation is treated as a separate program area, with an appropriations letter outlining the overall strategy and budget items for (1) bilateral cooperation with regions or countries, (2) allocation to different sectors and (3) multilateral organizations and debt related activities.[23] Prior to 2012, there was an ability for allocation letters to be based on three-yearly plans by country but this practice was discontinued, making longer aid commitments more difficult.

Unlike Sweden and the UK, ***Norway*** has no legal foundation for its foreign aid programme and provides the MFA with no legislative provision for its role as a development actor.[24] Restrictions and conditions on aid are made on an ad hoc basis, through individual appropriations letters, government policy addresses and White Papers. This has potentially been the basis for some weaknesses in policy coherence. Recent White Papers (2009, 2013,

2015) have all positioned development within the context of wider foreign policy and security issues, some say to the detriment of a robust commitment to sustainable and ethical development (Curtis, 2010, 2014; Vormedal & Lunde, 2015).[25] A number of commentators lament the fact that Norway has yet to offer a big idea to the world, lacking a strategic framework for its interventions beyond just 'making Norway look good' (Curtis, 2010: 25; de Coning, Luras, Schi, & Ulriksen, 2010, p. 2)

This desire to 'look good' rather than 'do good' is also a matter of concern in the context of weak ***interventional*** mechanisms in Norway. While there are a number of monitoring, reporting and accounting mechanisms, they arguably only give "'the impression that institutional focus is on results" (Lindkvist & Dixon, 2014, p. 354). This formal interventional system is overseen by a diverse range of bodies including the Public Accounts Committee, the Auditor General and NORAD's evaluation unit and quality control functions. A recent evaluation of Norwegian results management highlights that "although results are high on the agenda, results management appears not to be a priority in practice" (NORAD, 2014, p. iii). In the absence of a clear strategy, results management lacks a basic consensus on key concepts and so simply contributes to frustration and fatigue among staff.[26] At the heart of the problem appears the ability for the N-MFA to maintain a significant degree of autonomy from these cross-cutting interventional mechanisms, which one gets the impression also sometimes work at cross-purposes. This may be because Norway’s administrative traditions and culture of trust, as well as the power and prestige of the N-MFA, have inured it from overly intrusive interventional oversight (Christensen, 2003).

The 2004 re-organisation was a distinct attempt by the MFA to re-centralise ***policy*** and strategy-setting functions that had gradually drifted to NORAD (ECON Centre for Economic Analysis, 2003, p. 44). While the N-MFA is still meant to exercise ultimate authority over development policy, successive peer reviews have suggested there remains some overlap with NORAD (OECD, 2008, 2013a). Clearly, NORAD has some remaining stake in development policy as a centre of technical expertise. Nonetheless, the N-MFA exercises ultimate policy authority over development policy, including where it intersects with foreign policy interests. It is from a foreign policy starting point that the MFA steers whole-of-government negotiations across ministries and leads the policy coherence agenda. This is attributed to some flagrant policy inconsistencies where national interests (for example, in the Arctic, in NATO and in Angola) steer Norwegian policy in directions that undermine the goals of sustainable and equitable development (Curtis, 2010, 2014; Vormedal & Lunde, 2015).

The privilege of a healthy budgetary position that translates into higher levels of aid, as well as a trusting sensibility, have fostered a high degree of ***managerial*** autonomy maintained by N-MFA staff. This is particularly the case at embassy level. Embassies have financial and programming authority that covers staffing, channels, instruments and partners to some extent (OECD, 2013a, p. 57-58). Responsibility for planning and approving interventions largely rest with programme officers and section heads (Lindkvist & Dixon, 2014). The N-MFA is both highly flexible and highly decentralised as a development agency, with staff capable of adapting and responding to evolving needs as and when they emerge.

Overall, the N-MFA has a range of autonomous powers in the structural, interventional, policy and managerial spheres. It also has legal ambiguity concerning its development commitments and status as development interlocutor, which to some degree sustain autonomy in its policy and interventional spheres. While its financial autonomy is constrained, this is largely due to the appropriations process which in most countries will always sit within Ministries of Finance. This convergence of autonomies, however, is not so much a challenge to privileging the national interest as it is conduit for it. This partly derives from the nature of the development agency itself in Norway, namely a powerful and unconstrained Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

7. Comparative case analysis: Examining points of leverage and limitation

All three case studies underline the multi-dimensional and contested nature of development agency autonomy. While it is difficult to emerge with generalisable principles given this small sample, there are some common threads and important differences across these cases that identify points of leverage and limitation for resisting the instrumentalisation of development to service the national interest. A multi-dimensional examination of autonomy also points to the ways tensions between national interest and humanitarian motives might be navigated. We present some of these findings in statement form below.

1. Structural autonomy is an important sphere of autonomy for defending developmental interests, but not to the exclusion of all others.

All three cases highlight the importance of formal structural autonomy for a development agent. In the case of Norway and Sweden, over the last decade the balance of structural autonomy has shifted to MFAs at the expense of their respective technical directorates, NORAD and Sida. This has had cascading effects for other spheres of autonomy, for example enhancing both MFAs' policy and interventional autonomy *vis a vis* their directorates. By contrast, the DfID example suggests that while structural autonomy is important, autonomy is other spheres is not wholly determined by it. Thus, while DFID maintains independent ministerial status and preserves a seat at the table within whole-of-government fora, this structural autonomy is not a foundation for the maintenance of autonomy in other dimensions, including policy, interventional and managerial independence. Our three cases thus suggest that while a pre-occupation with formal structures of bureaucratic autonomy is important, it is also valuable to look at other spheres of autonomy to understand its relationship to formal structure. These alternative dimensions of autonomy may offer some scope to maintain and protect a robust ethical orientation for development cooperation.

2. Legal autonomy provides a critical opportunity for development agencies to resist national interest norms, particularly as autonomy in other dimensions reduces.

The case of Sweden and the UK suggest that legal autonomy offers some prospects of defending a humanitarian and pro-poor conceptualisation of development, notwithstanding a reduction in autonomy for Sida and DfID in other dimensions. A legislative mandate for development activities and agents provides a formal and strategic orientation, which although difficult to enforce in judicial terms, nonetheless sends clear signals about priorities which all development agencies (not just primary ones) can be held accountable. When inevitable domestic policy conflicts emerge, legal autonomy minimizes the likelihood of co-optation and dilution of fundamental developmental concerns. In Norway, the lack of a legal framework means that the N-MFA has relatively unconstrained powers to promote development policy as an instrument of foreign policy and national security concerns, if it so chooses. To some degree, an expanding aid budget and Nordic sensibilities have prevented excessive co-optation and dilution, though the current fiscal and political environment in Norway may make it difficult to do so in the future.

3. Financial autonomy for a development agent will always be limited by actors with responsibility for fiscal oversight. Care should be taken, however, that financial autonomy is productive for advancing humanitarian interests, particularly for non-national stakeholders.

In all three cases, Ministries of Finance are responsible for the budget envelope and the overall appropriations process. In this regard, these fiscal bodies are shared constraints on all development agents. Nonetheless, it is also possible to see how there is varying capacity within fiscal rules for development agents to provide development finance over medium and long-term horizons and to re-profile funds to consider shifting contexts and circumstances. Moreover, the UK case potentially highlights some of the perverse consequences of legislating fiscal targets like ODA/GNI ratios which may give the illusion of autonomy but actual constrain a development agent. This includes increased encroachment by other governmental departments on an agent's mandate, pressures to disburse funds quickly, as well as the potential for diluting the integrity of the ODA definition itself. These pressures all work against the desire for a robust and effective development cooperation effort aligned to the interests of those beyond national borders.

4. Policy autonomy is growing for foreign affairs departments, in some cases challenging stewardship and protection of the ethical basis for development cooperation in favour of enlightened self-interest motives.

In all three cases, foreign affairs departments are gaining policy autonomy at the expense of technical agencies (Norway and Sweden) or development departments (UK). To the extent that this makes development a functional priority within a powerful MFA, this can place humanitarian motivations at the heart of a whole-of-government agenda. This is most obvious in the case of Sweden where, notably buttressed by a legislative commitment to policy coherence and some remaining policy autonomy for Sida, the S-MFA is emboldened to robustly steer this agenda within government. On the other hand, MFAs are formally mandated to represent domestic interest overseas, and as such their commitment to represent and advocate the ethical and moral imperatives of development is uncertain. This is most apparent in the case of the N-MFA where, notwithstanding strong pledges to policy coherence, there are inconsistencies and subordination of development concerns to wider foreign policy aims. The Norwegian case provides some evidence that development considerations are more likely to be subordinated to national foreign policy priorities when policy autonomy is exclusive and unchecked in a foreign affairs ministry (Killick, 2005; Pratt, 2000).

5. Interventional oversight is growing across all development agencies, though ministries of foreign affairs appear better able to side-step such demands.

All development agencies are, at least in a formal sense, deeply embedded in reporting requirements that embed them in the prolific production of targets, reports and accounting mechanisms. In the UK and to a lesser degree Sweden, increased interventional obligations signal weakened public and government confidence in DfID and Sida respectively, plausibly undermining their stewardship role on development. In Norway, it would appear interventional practices lack strategic orientation such that the N-MFA preserves a modicum autonomy. In Sweden too, the S-MFA seems more insulated from interventional oversight than Sida. If MFAs can avoid formal scrutiny, this runs the real risk that foreign policy objectives provide a stronger anchor and frame for all developmental activities and engagements.

6. Strained managerial autonomy in non-MFA development agencies challenges a robust commitment to global development.

With the exception of the Nordic ministries of foreign affairs, managerial autonomy in development agencies is under stress. In Sida, risk and internal controls have put managerial autonomy under strain whereas in DfID, outsourcing and expenditure ceilings suggest a shrinking space for staff closest to development problems to act according to their professional judgement. This weakening in managerial autonomy in agencies mandated to look beyond the national interest is a potential challenge to the advancement of developmental ambitions, particularly where such autonomy might allow for greater alignment to the complex realities of local needs in-country.

8. Conclusion

Consideration of autonomy within bilateral donors is often reduced to a decision about the nature of structural autonomy, that is the formal independence/integration of a development ministry from a ministry of foreign affairs. And certainly structural autonomy is important, having been shown econometrically to enlarge aid budgets and support more humanitarian concerns (Arel-Bundock et al., 2015; Fuchs et al., 2014). Nonetheless, the preceding discussion should make abundantly clear that autonomy is a much larger concept, involving decisions that go well beyond and cut across formal structure. Autonomy is a critical design variable whose multiple dimensions need to be given due consideration in the context of development agency roles and reforms. Only an integrated and nuanced study of its various spheres can shed light on the relationship between autonomy and development agency performance.

For the purposes of this paper, the metric of performance has been the capacity to advance a principled humane internationalist vision for global development, notwithstanding growing policy desire to instrumentalise aid for the advancement of the national interest. While these twin motivations are not necessarily zero-sum, there are very real tensions in achieving 'mutual interests' simultaneously and in equal measure.

Examined from the perspective of three high performing donor countries, we see there are both opportunities for autonomy to advance developmental ambitions but also instances where configurations of autonomies are potentially counter-productive to this ends. It also appears critical to understand who serves as the main development agency. Our findings suggest that ministries of foreign affairs are not as well placed to advance a principled development orientation, especially if diplomatic interests are unconstrained by legal and policy frameworks. In this regard, notwithstanding the contested nature of structural autonomy in Sweden, there is some reason to believe this configuration is preferable to that of Norway's where the N-MFA has relatively uncontested autonomy in almost all dimensions. Our cases highlight that Norway is perhaps least well adapted of the three to defend against dilution of a robust development agenda. Considering the UK and Swedish cases where foreign affairs ministries have grown in power at the expense of DfID and Sida respectively, it is perhaps less obvious which agency is best adapted to face down the challenge of the mutual interest paradigm. There is some reason to believe, however, the force with which this framing has impressed itself on the new UK Aid Strategy, coupled with the political moment of Brexit at which it has arrived, means that DfID faces a tougher battle to preserve a principled commitment to development policy than Sida.

Overall, this paper has illustrated the value of a holistic multi-dimensional assessment of autonomy that can inform a nuanced understanding of organisational behaviour among development agencies. It suggests that reflecting on agency autonomy offers the very real prospect for a development project that is not overwhelmingly colonised by nationalist ambitions, but it also highlights the spheres where agencies are limited in their capacity to subsume the national interest for the sake of more principled international engagements. This analysis of autonomy has the capacity to draw attention to distinct vulnerabilities facing these three development agencies in their current normative environment, and gives some thought to where, and how, these can be addressed. This multi-dimensional approach to the study of development agency autonomy also potentially allows consideration of the ways all bilateral donors balance the ever-present tension between nationalistic and developmental aims, as well as pointing to relevant organisational spaces where such conflicts can be minimized to support humanitarian imperatives. For example, in the case of newer non-DAC donors where economic diplomacy imperatives drive the establishment of bilateral aid programmes housed within ministries of foreign affairs (Dreher, Nunnenkamp, & Thiele, 2011; Fuchs & Vadlamannati, 2013), these findings point to spheres of autonomy that may assist in strengthening development orientations, including a legislative mandate for development cooperation and greater policy and managerial autonomy. It also suggests that the elimination of structural autonomy of stand-alone development agencies, for example as recently occurred in Canada and Australia, potentially risks subordinating developmental motivations if such mergers are not accompanied by appropriate legal and interventional checks and balances.

International development agencies are expected to represent and champion global development priorities and the plight of the world's poor within a donor nation. Currently, they are also being asked to more clearly justify development in terms of the achievement of national priorities and interests. Although playing the role of both doting hen and defensive lioness, there are features that can be conductive to the bilateral beast taming her selfish ambitions and nurturing her global compassion and empathy. The development agency may necessarily have to service both functions but the hope is that through greater consideration of multi-dimensional autonomies, the hen outsmarts the lion more often than not.

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[1] Depending on the country, these agencies are configured and located in a variety of locations within government, including Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Ministries of Development or as arm's length administrative bodies.

[2] Non-DAC donors more than doubled aid to Southern recipients between 2010-2014, reaching over US$ 24 billion in 2014. See http://devinit.org/development-cooperation-emerging-providers-rising/

[3] This is best exemplified by the UK's new Aid strategy that is sub-titled "Tackling global challenges in the national interest".

[4] Ten ministries, the Prime Minister's Office and two special offices including Sweden's representation to the EU, comprise Government Offices. A Cabinet Minister appointed by the Prime Minister heads each Ministry.

[5] For example, as the global migration crisis justifies greater spending of ODA in donor countries, this can reduce the role of a development agency that has little experience on migration and integration policies. Increased spending of ODA funds by other government departments thus erodes the authority of development agencies.

[6] The paper develops an index of bureaucratic independence for the 15 US aid-giving governmental agencies and demonstrates that independence is inversely correlated to the enactment of foreign policy preferences of the President. Where US agencies are protected from Executive influence, the public service orientation of bureaucrats leads them to allocate aid where it is most needed rather than to where the national interest might dictate.

[7] Other development agencies include the Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC) (3.6% of the ODA budget in 2013) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) (2.5%). The Inter-Departmental Conflict Pool managed 1.7% of the UK's ODA volume in 2013 (OECD, 2014: 55)

[8] Newspapers were chosen to reflect different political perspectives. In Sweden, this was *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Davens Nyheter*. In Norway, *Aftensposten* and *Verdens Gang*. And in the UK *The Guardian* and *Daily Mail*. A native Swedish speaker read and interpreted all Scandinavian sources.

[9] Deniz Kellecioglu: 'Egenintressen förstör biståndet', Dagens Arena, 1 November 2013. http://www.dagensarena.se/opinion/deniz-kellecioglu-egenintressen-forstor-bistandet/

[10] This supply procedure is presented by the Treasury in Parliament at the start of the financial year. Revised or Supplementary Estimates can ask Parliament for approval for additional resources, capital and/or cash or for authority to incur additional expenditures. While formally no spending can occur without Parliament's approval, in practice Parliament has virtually no ability to meaningfully change government's spending plans.

[11] For example, the last Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government sought to widen within the definition of ODA spending to include expenditures for security-related initiatives in failed and fragile states, a plausible form of compensation for the reduction to defense budgets. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21528464 See also https://www.ft.com/content/24f11670-8f74-11e5-8be4-3506bf20cc2b

[12] http://www.owen.org/blog/7496; www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2950023/Foreign-aid-budget-far-big-spend-increased-quickly-officials-unprepared-it.html; www.daily.mail.co.uk/news/article-3543839/DfID-s-end-year-rush-hit-spending-targets-Astonishing-upsurge-payments-meet-0.7-cent-foreign-aid-requirement.html

[13] In 2013-14, the Department chose to give multilateral organisations 43% more in core funding than it did in 2012-13, compared to a 33% increase in bilateral aid (Comptroller and Auditor General 2015).

[14] This reduced responsibility is expected to derive from a fall in Country Programmable Aid, the flexible and discretionary resource given to country offices and regional programmes. See also http://www.simonmaxwell.eu/blog/the-new-uk-aid-strategy-comments-and-questions.html

[15] For several years, DfID topped the Capability Review survey.

[16] See also www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/feb/02/dfid-future-at-risk-whitehall-influence-security-international-development-committee

[17] In financial year 2011-12, DfID awarded 135 contracts to 58 contractors, totaling £489 million.

[18] https://www.thelocal.se/20100527/26880

[19] Svenska Dagbladet, 'UD sågar sin egen biståndshantering' 17 October, 2013: http://www.svd.se/ud-sagar-sin-egen-bistandshantering

[20] Svenska Dagbladet, 'Krav på att UD fråntas bistånd', 19 October, 2013: http://www.svd.se/krav-pa-att-ud-frantas-bistand

[21] http://www.scidev.net/global/cooperation/news/swedish-government-sida--research.html

[22] This is some improvement from the past, when policy setting involved making sense of a maze of perspectives, thematic priorities, and bilateral strategies (OECD, 2009, 2013b).

[23] http://donortracker.org/donor-profiles/norway/budget-process

[24] http://www.loc.gov/law/help/foreign-aid/norway.php

[25] Some obvious contradictions: Norway's US$ 500 M aid commitment to conserve rainforests is drowned by the Norwegian pension fund's US$ 13.7 B investment in companies constituting significant threats to sustainable development. Or Norway's overseas business interests compromising its commitment to robust global corporate social responsibility standards.

[26] https://www.civita.noassets/2015/04/Civita-notat_05_2015.pdf p. 33