Hunger in the Balance: The New Politics of International Food Aid

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What is Political About Food Aid?
Key Messages:

- Today’s food aid politics are different from the past in two important ways:
  - Debates over form in which food aid is given (mainly whether it is tied or not) dominate; new dividing line between donors
  - New political arenas in which debates over food aid take place (biotechnology, WTO, international food aid governance reform)
- Yet some aspects of the ‘old’ politics of food aid are still relevant today
Outline:

1. Past Understandings of Food Aid Politics

2. New Politics of Food Aid I: Tied vs. Untied Aid

3. New Politics of Food Aid II: New Arenas

4. The Future of Food Aid Politics?
Past Understandings of Food Aid Politics

- **Realists**
  - Political and economic interest of donors

- **Radicals**
  - Mercantilist motivations / support to agribusiness

- **Liberal institutionalists**
  - Development ‘regime’ anchored in international institutions

- **Constructivists**
  - Norms and ideas promoted via international organizations
Context of declining deliveries...

The principal donors...

**FIGURE 2.2.** Food aid deliveries by donor, 2009. Source: WFP Interfais.
The New Politics of Food Aid I: The Question of Tied Aid

- Early food aid mainly tied to donor sourced food (surplus disposal)
- Mid-1990s, Europe untied food aid
- Mid 2000s, Canada and Australia followed suit
- US maintained nearly 100% tied food aid (despite Bush and Natsios campaign)
- Japan moved to become more tied in past decade
What Explains Donor Policy Divergence re: Tying? Old and new factors…

- Donor economic interests still important (in both tying and untying states)
- New economic interests (Not just agribusiness, but also NGOs, shippers, and aid agency budget constraints)
- Domestic institutional policy-making context
- Despite international promotion of new norms to untie, policy divergence emerged between major donors
The New Politics of Food Aid II: New Arenas for Debate

- End of Cold War and end of surplus did not mean an end to food aid politics

- Policy divergence among donors → Political clashes over food aid at the international level

- Debates in new arenas that were not predicted in earlier studies
a. Agricultural Biotechnology

- 1998-2003 EU *de facto* moratorium vs North American approach

- Developing countries took European precautionary approach

- WFP lacked process for identification/notification

- Zambia refused GMO aid in midst of crisis; others demanded milling

- US blamed Europe…
b. Agricultural Trade Talks at the WTO

- WTO Agreement on Agriculture revisions under Doha Round to tackle food aid

- EU made case US food aid practices equivalent to export subsidies

- Heated clashes at the WTO Hong Kong Ministerial 2005

- Tentative agreement 2008; still not finalized
c. Global Food Aid Governance Reform in Wake of Food Crisis

- Since 2006 food price volatility and increased hunger: Challenges for both tied and untied aid
- WFP asks for more cash to meet its budget; greater role for local and regional purchase
- Renegotiation of the Food Aid Convention; questions of counting food aid commitments and governance arrangements
The Future of Food Aid Politics?

- Food aid likely to remain political in near future...

- New political dimensions:
  - Ready to use foods with patent protection
  - New donors with different preferences
  - New economic conditions of hunger
Food aid resources declining just as prices rising...

**FIGURE 2.7.** FAO cereal price index as compared with food aid deliveries and commitments under the Food Aid Convention, 1970–2009. Source: WFP Interfais, International Grains Council, FAO.
Conclusion...

- Food aid just one of many possible interventions to improve food security

- But the international community has not prepared well for a world with less food aid. Needed are:
  - More balanced trade policies
  - Greater investment in production
  - Policies to improve access

- Until these other measures taken seriously, food aid is likely to remain important, and political