



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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UCT doctoral research uncovers recurring issue in international donor strategies

A PhD thesis from the University of Cape Town's Faculty of Commerce reveals evidence of a recurring problem that undermines the effectiveness of global poverty alleviation efforts.

Dr Alexander O'Riordan graduated with a doctoral degree in Economics in June of 2016. His thesis examines the reasons why donor aid strategies are so often removed from and even contrary to the development needs of beneficiary countries.

"I found that aid is shaped more so by the organisational and institutional culture of the donors and less so by the needs 'on the ground'. So, there are signs that donors presume the solutions based on a world view that their own organisations create as part of their branding, and less in terms of identifying the real world problem and trying to respond to it," O'Riordan says.

"My question looked at why this problem persists when it is widely seen as contributing to donor money being wasted and directly contradicts the stated intentions of international donors themselves."

O'Riordan was inspired to take on this topic after working in the international development sector for more than a decade and in over 12 different countries. Through his work, he began to notice that while donors made grand promises of what they would like to do, these plans often did not materialise on the ground and thus, were not able to bring about the anticipated benefits to people's lives.

For his PhD research, O'Riordan set out to understand why this contradiction occurs so frequently.

The analysis draws a comparison between the policies of international donors' 'country programmable aid' and the results of these programmes. It examines the relationship between the donor strategies and the beneficiary country's national development plans, and the extent to which donors have understood the political economy and context of these countries.

The findings reveal that, almost invariably, donor aid programmes have not been guided and shaped by the context nor by the national development plans of the recipients of aid.

“These patterns relate to the decontextualisation of aid, accompanied by a narrative of donor superiority, both moral and technological, and overly-ambitious objectives.

The findings imply that these patterns are predictable because they result from implicit rules governing the process of aid allocation by donors, rather than the recipient countries’ contexts and requirements,” notes O’Riordan.

This evidence could make a valuable contribution to the ways in which policy makers concerned with making international donors more effective at alleviating poverty can go about doing this.

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Jessica Loizides

Media Liaison Assistant
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5671
Cell: (084) 621 9337
Email: jessica.loizides@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za