

## What counts as aid: Dilemmas and ways forward in measuring China's overseas development flows

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**ABSTRACT:** The geography of foreign aid is in flux as a growing number of countries from the global South are entering the field as donors. A principal barrier to understanding this trend is divergence in the definition of aid amongst emerging market donors, and between emerging market donors and traditional donors, as well as transparency in reporting. This paper contributes to analysts' toolbox by developing a comparative analysis of aid definitions for China, the largest global South donor in the world. Using a leading comprehensive database on Chinese aid flows, I construct an index of definitional restrictiveness for two governmental and three proxy definitions developed by scholars to reconcile aid from non-OECD donors with OECD definitions. Based on this analysis, I find that the most inclusive definition of aid does not always translate into the highest aid total estimate. In addition, definitions of aid are moving targets rather than static measures, which can include different flows at different times depending on the state of the global foreign aid system and its major players.

## **I. Introduction**

At a recent conference on China's international infrastructure and development program, called One Belt, One Road, Chinese president Xi Jinping discussed massive infrastructure investments in order to boost economic growth and increase trade in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and eventually Europe (Phillips 2017). One Belt, One Road is the latest indicator of China's role as a source of finance for development and aid. Included in the development initiative are pipelines, ports, bridges, railways and a sea route. Chinese officials view the project as a way to usher in a "new era of globalization" (Ruwitch and Blanchard 2017) as well as a geopolitical strategy to win nations to the side of the putative next leader of the global economy. The conference occurred at a moment when skepticism and volatility of the American political system under Trump could sway nations towards China's sphere of influence (ibid.).

In addition to China, other global South countries such as Brazil and India are increasing their participation in the global economy as donors and investors. These countries are now well recognized for their involvement in the global aid system, specifically because of their focus on South-South development (Grimm et al. 2011). China is of particular interest, however, due to its impressive economic growth and the challenge that the country presents to the current

global development order. Specifically, China's aid disbursements to the African continent have received a lot of attention in geography and beyond (Carmody and Taylor 2010; Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010; Carmody 2011; Williamson 2012), as well as in media and policy circles (Gill and Reilly 2010). The debate in the U.S. centers around China's willingness to give development aid to other nations while the country still struggles with poverty and inequality itself (Glosny 2006). In addition, critics charge China with upholding corrupt governments through aid disbursement and thus negatively affecting the plight of human rights (Council on Foreign Relations 2005; Wells 2011; Isaksson and Kotsadam 2016).

One major limitation that hinders an empirically driven approach to this debate is China's lack of transparency and data reporting on aid. Several scholars (Brautigam 2009, 2011, 2012; Carmody 2010, 2011; Dreher, et al. 2015; Tan-Mullins, Mohan and Power 2010) note that China's unwillingness to publish development assistance data beyond aggregate figures for select years contributes to a perception of secrecy and corruption in the West. Dreher and Fuchs (2015), for example, analyze claims that Chinese development aid is "rogue aid," backed by selfish, commercial interests. While the authors argue that such a claim is unjustified, they acknowledge nonetheless that China's refusal to publish annual bilateral aid figures makes it difficult for researchers to gather the correct data on the country's bilateral development assistance.

Not only does China lack transparency in aid data reporting but the country, like other emerging market donors such as Brazil, Indonesia and South Africa, is also not a member of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). By extension, then, China does not participate in the OECD's Development Co-operation Directorate (DAC), the pre-eminent body for coordination and management of development finance, made up of major Western donors. The DAC provides standard definitions for what qualifies as official development aid (ODA), adopted by all DAC donors in reporting and setting multilateral aid goals. While China does not outright reject this widely used definition of aid, the country's definition, which it applies to self-reported data, is not aligned with it (Glosny 2006; Office of the State Council 2014).

Scholars have attempted to reconcile non-DAC definitions of ODA by developing proxies for the DAC definition. Dreher, et al. (2015), Kitano and Harada (2015), and Brautigam (2009), in particular, have developed definitions for Chinese development assistance, which are the most widely recognized and used in the literature. To date, there are no studies that offer a systematic comparison and analysis of the different definitions offered by scholars and a non-DAC government. This gap hampers studies of Chinese bilateral aid since dependence on one proxy over another may introduce bias into the results. In this paper, I analyze and compare five definitions of bilateral aid -- three scholarly and two governmental (China plus the DAC

definition) -- and, based on comparative calculations of Chinese aid flows to the African continent using each definition, I develop a scale of restrictiveness. This scale will aid geographers who undertake research on South-South development assistance flows by facilitating the identification of aid over- and under-representation when assessing China's role as a source of bilateral development funding. The restrictiveness scale contributes to the development of more accurate methods to compare apples to oranges, or more appropriately, apples to dragon fruits, when analyzing rapidly changing trends in aid funding (Brautigam 2009; Dreher and Fuchs 2015).

I proceed in three subsequent sections. In section 2, I review the current literature on Chinese aid flows, transparency and the issues encountered when comparing such flows to those of traditional DAC donors. In section 3, using a media-based database from the College of William and Mary, I discuss the method used to determine aid totals according to each scholarly and governmental definition. From these totals, I construct a restrictiveness scale. In section 4, I discuss the findings from the aid calculations and implications for the usage of the scale in research on South-South aid cooperation. I find that aid totals are nuanced and the broadest definition does not necessarily lead to the highest figure of development aid. In addition, DAC and non-DAC definitions of aid are moving targets rather than static measures, which can

include different flows at different times depending on the state of the global foreign aid system and its major players.

## **II. The problem of measuring Chinese aid**

Several prominent scholars who study Chinese-African relations through the lens of aid monies, FDI, and other monetary flows as well as diplomatic relations have identified data reliability as a major impediment for assessing the magnitude and significance of these flows (Brautigam 2009, 2011, 2012; Carmody 2010, 2011; Dreher, et al. 2015). Incomplete and mis-categorized data introduce severe empirical limitations to the study of China's disbursement of development assistance in comparison to traditional donors such as the United States and U.K., as well as the frequent misrepresentation of aid flows reported by both supporters and skeptics of China's role in global South development.

The issue of measuring Chinese development assistance is situated within a broader discussion of the emergence of new donors within the global aid system. In the case of China, which has been disbursing aid to the African continent since the 1950's, the impetus to measure Chinese aid disbursements accurately is more critical today due to the country's rapidly growing role as a donor (Brautigam 2012; Granath 2016). Chinese assistance and financial flows are often difficult to quantify and compare with DAC data for three principal reasons. First, as noted, the

country is not a member of the OECD DAC (Strange et al. 2015) and thus is exempt from categorizing and operating under international development standards shared by OECD members. Second, China has opted out of other major non-governmental standards initiatives, most notably the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI). Third, although China has signed the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action, the country is signed on as both a donor and a recipient (Granath 2016). The result of these institutional exclusions and (mis)categorizations is that China operates with reporting categories and norms that are neither shared with global North donors, nor standardized, inhibiting comparison and thus knowledge of a quickly changing aid landscape.

By OECD standards, China is not a large donor: the country gave approximately \$2 billion in 2010 compared to \$30 billion from the U.S. (Callan, Blak, and Thomas 2013). The United Nations has set a target of 0.7% of a country's gross national income (GNI) as part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and more recently, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which came into effect in January 2016 (DAC 2002; United Nations 2015). The U.S. has not reached this target to date and has consistently disbursed around 0.1% of GNI as aid since 2012 (OECD 2017). At a High-Level OECD meeting in Paris in 2014, the DAC decided to introduce a grant equivalent system in order to give more weight to concessional loans and give a higher credit amount to grants over loans (OECD 2014). This change can be viewed as an

attempt by western donors to expand aid definitions in order to meet multilateral objectives set in the MDGs and SDGs. The expansion can also be seen as a geopolitical strategy in which countries try to maintain dominance in the global foreign aid system in the face of new actors, like China, expanding their donor role and operating with different standards.

Deborah Brautigam, who consistently takes up the issue of China's "non-transparent and poorly understood" aid system (2011), has discussed how differences in definitions between the DAC and China can lead to over-counting and under-counting of the country's development financing. Furthermore, the many instruments used by China in order to promote engagement with African countries contribute to much of the confusion (ibid. 2011). China offers global South aid recipients a "package-financing mode," for example, that combines export buyer's and seller's credits and concessional loans for, but not limited to, targeted projects (Brautigam 2012). While ODA donors would exclude credits, the Chinese government counts the entire package as aid. Thus, if compared to DAC donors using the DAC definitions, China's ODA would be significantly smaller than the self-reported figures in this case. Dreher and Fuchs (2015) also support the finding that when using the OECD ODA definition, estimates for Chinese aid to countries are lower overall. Over-counting by China, from an OECD perspective, is not always the case, however. In a recent controversy, a New York Times article reported that Djibouti was "billions of dollars" in debt due to Chinese loans (Jacobs and Perlez 2017). Brautigam estimated



the debt figure to in fact be \$1.3 billion, and stated that the high estimate was a case of misrepresentation by U.S. skeptics, or perhaps a case of “alternative facts” (2017).

Scholars offer different explanations of why the country lacks transparency and a better system to report development assistance flows. For example, Granath argues that high-level party officials are involved in the distribution of aid in China and the process of determining aid allocation is highly secretive (2016; see also Grimm et al. 2011). Kitano and Harada (2016) cite other institutional reasons. No independent agency for foreign aid exists in China, thus there is no mechanism for central reporting and oversight. The responsibility falls mainly under the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) (Dreher et al. 2015), which is responsible for creating mid- and long-term foreign aid policies and country specific aid strategies, although other departments that fall under the State Council also engage in donor activity (Kitano and Harada 2016). In addition, when Grimm and colleagues interviewed Chinese government officials and asked why country specific aid data was not included in official aid data reporting, including the White Paper on Foreign Aid (2011), informants attributed the lack of disclosure to “politics” as well as administrative competition within the government (2011).

### *Differing Definitions*

In this paper, I compare five definitions of Chinese development assistance, beginning with those offered by the DAC and Chinese government. I then select three definitions

constructed by scholars and recognized most widely as proxies in order to assist researchers in measuring Chinese development assistance, identifying trends, and comparing with OECD donors (see **Table 1** for summary).

According to the OECD DAC definition, ODA consists of “grants or loans...which are: (a) undertaken by the official sector; (b) with promotion of economic development and welfare as the main objective; (c) at concessional financial terms”<sup>1</sup> (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2007). Technical cooperation is also included in aid, however grants, loans, and credits for military purposes are excluded (see note 7).

China considers grants, interest-free loans, and concessional loans (see note 8) to be foreign assistance in its key White Paper on Foreign Aid (China Office of State Council 2014). The White Paper additionally outlines several *forms* of foreign assistance, which include complete projects, goods and materials, technical cooperation and reduction or exemption of debts of recipient countries.

Brautigam defines at least nine different kinds of aid in addition to grants, zero interest loans, and concessional loans (2009). While these categories do not constitute a specific

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<sup>1</sup> In reference to concessional aid flows, if it is a loan, it must have a grant element of at least 25% and be calculated at a 10% rate of discount (DAC 2017; Is it ODA? 2008). The discount rate is calculated from the LIBOR rate, a global benchmark interest rate set by leading banking institutions.

“definition” of aid per se, they speak to the types of development assistance given by China that Brautigam has observed. The kinds of aid include medical teams, training and scholarships, humanitarian aid, youth volunteers, debt relief, budget support, turnkey or “complete plant” projects, aid-in-kind and technical assistance.

Kitano and Harada developed another proxy for Chinese aid to facilitate comparison with DAC donor aid (2016). The authors classify China’s development assistance as:

“Grants and interest-free loans managed by MOFCOM, grants managed by other departments responsible for foreign aid, scholarships provided by the Ministry of Education to students from other developing countries, the estimated amount of interest subsidies on concessional loans which is deducted from the total amount of aid, the net<sup>2</sup> and gross<sup>3</sup> disbursements of concessional loans as bilateral foreign aid and multilateral foreign aid” (see note 10).

Finally, Strange et al. (2015), who manage the database used to gather development aid data in this analysis, created an aid definition closely following the DAC definition of aid. Strange et al. use the term ODA-like for all grants, technical assistance and scholarships, loans

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<sup>2</sup> Net flows refer to the gross amount of capital less repayments of the loan principle over a period of time (Kitano and Harada 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Gross flows refer to the full amount of capital transfers to a recipient (ibid.).

with large grant elements, debt relief and military aid with development intent.<sup>4</sup> Vague official finance is a residual category used for projects with insufficient information to determine whether they are ODA-like or instead fall in the alternate category of “other financial flows,” or OOF-like.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I classify each aid definition according to these categories since these categories are used in the database to determine what is aid and what is not.

<sup>5</sup> Strange et al. (2010) use ODA, OOF, and Official Investment to categorize Chinese flows within their database. An example of a project categorized as vague, as cited from AidData’s Methodology for Tracking Underreported Financial Flows (2015), is a “concessional” loan from China Exim Bank to a state-run company in Sierra Leone. However, the concessionality of the loan is unclear and thus makes it difficult to classify as ODA or OOF.

**Table 1. Chinese Development Aid Definitions and Proxies<sup>i</sup>**

	Technical Assistance and Scholarships	Loans with large grant elements	Grants with development intent (in-kind)	Grants with development intent (financial)	Debt relief	Military aid with development intent
<b>OECD DAC<sup>ii</sup></b>						
<b>China White Paper<sup>iii</sup></b>						
Brautigam <sup>iv</sup>						
Kitano and Harada <sup>v</sup>						
Strange et al. <sup>vi</sup>						

<sup>i</sup> Light gray boxes indicate that only part of the category is included in a definition or it is included but with certain provisions.

<sup>ii</sup> The DAC definition of ODA includes some forms of technical co-operation or assistance, for example, refugee assistance. However, scholarships are excluded from ODA. In addition, military assistance is not counted as ODA (DAC 2017; Is it ODA? 2008).

<sup>iii</sup> China considers concessional loans to be foreign assistance however, the Export-Import Bank uses the interest rate set by the People's Bank of China as the benchmark rate rather than the LIBOR rate which most traditional donors use to calculate loan concessionality (Office of the State Council 2014). This difference may mean the interest rates for concessional loans are sometimes higher or lower than loans from Western donors at any given time. In regards to grants, China does not specify development intent as necessary thus, I have calculated these figures from data classified with development intent and mixed intent (some development included). Additionally, human resources development cooperation, dispatching of medical teams and volunteers, and emergency humanitarian aid are also cited as forms of foreign assistance although I find these disbursements to be negligible according to the database (Office of the State Council 2014).

<sup>iv</sup> Brautigam includes zero interest loans as well as concessional loans (which I categorize as loans with large grant elements) (Brautigam 2009).

<sup>v</sup> Kitano and Harada (2014) include scholarships given by the Ministry of Education but not technical assistance in their foreign aid measure. The authors count the full amount of capital transfers (gross disbursements) as well as the gross amount less repayments of loan principles (net). AidData database only allows one to calculate and include gross disbursements as aid. Finally, multilateral aid is included in this definition for China's foreign aid but I have excluded it and focus only on bilateral transfers.

<sup>vi</sup> Strange et al. composed their definition according to the OECD DAC definition thus; I included only "ODA-like" flows.

As we can observe with these five aid definitions, the inconsistencies in what is counted as aid leads to a disjunction in reporting depending on the definition used. Although there are overlapping modes of aid in multiple definitions, year-to-year variances confirm the need to better understand the implications of using one definition over another.

### **III. Constructing A Restrictiveness Index**

This section draws on the government definitions and proxies for aid explained in Section 2 and measures Chinese bilateral aid flows to the African continent according to each definition from 2001 to 2013. The purpose of these calculations is to detail ways in which each definition over- or underrepresents, or perhaps accurately represents, assistance flows from China. I then build the restrictiveness scale, which aggregates the aid figures for each definition for each year.

I calculate definition-specific aid totals using the China AidData database from the College of William and Mary. This prominent database includes the most complete set of data on Chinese aid collected from a variety of sources including media-based reports and other public data from government officials, journalists, business professionals, etc. The twelve-year period selected is the widest range capable of capturing aid data for all five definitions. While the database applies definitions of aid similar to that of the OECD DAC, I used the extensive

metadata descriptions and created additional manual filters to calculate aid definitions based on the five most widely used definitions that I identified.

Following the classification of each definition's aid categories into the categories used by Strange et al. in the database (see **Table 1** for more detailed notes on categorization), I filtered and included or excluded certain data according to definitions. The easiest filter to apply was the flow (i.e. grant, loan, technical assistance, debt forgiveness, etc.). In several cases, as with intent and loan type, filtering required a more thorough look back at aid definitions for precise calculation.

With respect to intent, since the China White Paper (2011) does not specify that development intent is required to define a flow as aid, I included development, mixed, and mixed (some development) intents. Similarly, calculations for Brautigam's and Kitano and Harada's definitions included the same intents. For OECD, I chose to include only flows with development intent.<sup>12</sup> Lastly, Strange et al. includes development intent and some mixed (some development) intent.

Loan types were filtered either by interest-free or concessional depending on the flow being calculated. For interest-free loans, I used only loans which had a zero indicated for the interest rate for all five definitions. In addition, for concessional loans, I used loans with 25%

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<sup>12</sup> This is tied to the OECD DAC definition for ODA requiring aid flows to have development intent.

grant elements or higher to calculate aid for the China<sup>13</sup>, OECD, and Strange et al.<sup>14</sup> I included all concessional loans regardless of grant element for Brautigam.

After filtering the aid data, I computed totals for each year from 2001-2013 for each definition (see **Figure 1**). One can observe that each of the five definitions follows a similar trend over the time assessed.

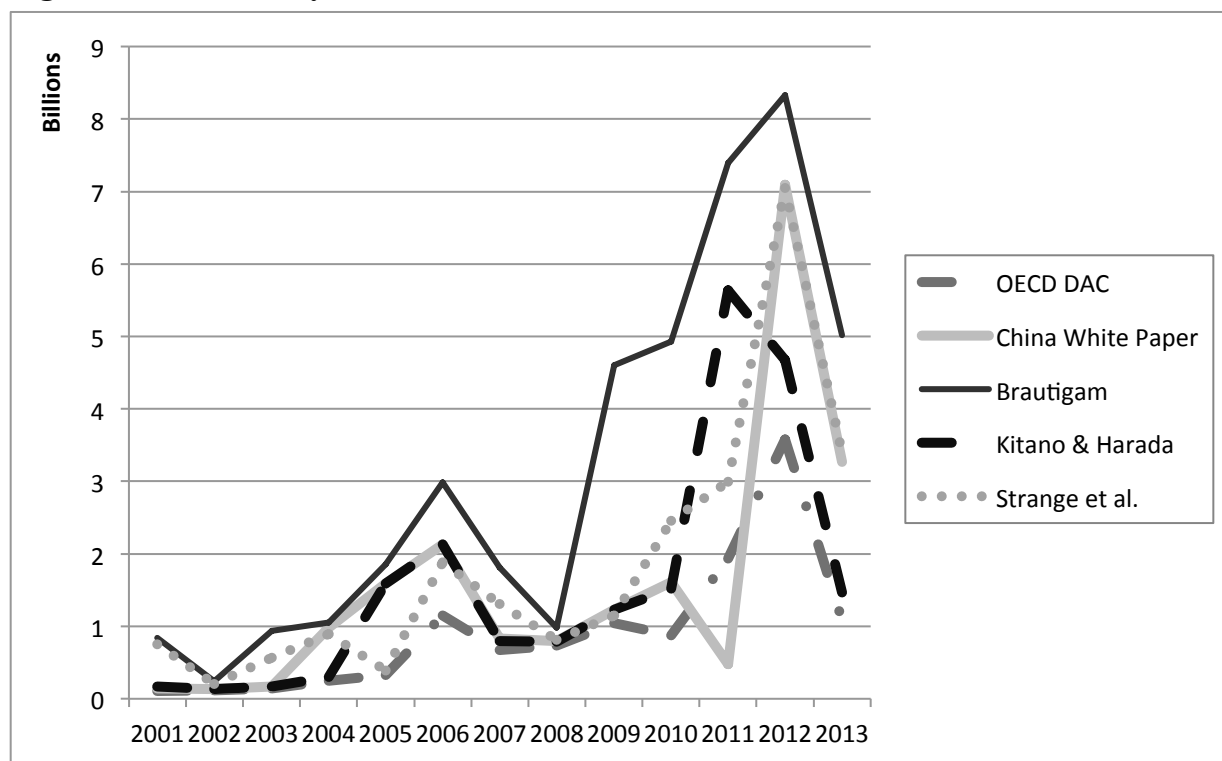
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<sup>13</sup> Although China uses the benchmark interest rate given by the People's Bank of China, the AidData database calculates concessional terms from the LIBOR rate.

<sup>14</sup> Although Strange et al. includes loans with large grant elements rather than concessional loans, I used only loans with a 25% or higher grant element due to the definition closely resembling the OECD definition for ODA and uncertainty of what qualifies as a "large" grant element.



**Figure 1. Aid Totals by Definition, 2001-2013**



With foreign aid calculated for each year and each definition, I then ranked each from highest estimate (most broad) to lowest estimate and took the average over the twelve-year period. Additionally, I calculated the mode of rankings. Based on these calculations, I ranked the definitions from least restrictive (with a value of 1) to most restrictive (value of 5) (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Rank of Aid Definitions, 2001-2013**

	OECD DAC	China White Paper	Brautigam	Kitano & Harada	Strange et al.
<b>Mode</b>	5	3	1	4	2
<b>Average</b>	4.9	3.07	1	3.3	2.69
<b>Restrictive Index (1-5)</b>	5	3	1	4	2

#### IV. Discussion

One principal finding from this analysis is that the most inclusive definitions do not necessarily compute to the largest aid total year to year. The slight differences in counting certain flows as aid produce a more nuanced picture of development assistance from China. Additionally, many of the more inclusive definitions include aid-in-kind and non-monetary aid, unlike the OECD definition, and these in-kind forms create significant difficulties for calculation (see below).

In **Figure 1**, we see that each of the five definitions is closely clustered around each other up until 2006 when the estimate based on Brautigam reaches nearly three billion dollars. The definitions separate even more dramatically following 2008 when totals based on Brautigam skyrocket while other estimates based on OECD and Kitano and Harada definitions begin to decline slightly. Interestingly, China's White Paper has a lower estimate of Chinese aid than the OECD in 2011. Also of note is that although Strange et al. claim to model their aid definitions after the OECD definition, Strange et al. ranks number two (second least restrictive) on the index while the OECD ranks fifth as most restrictive.

According to the White Paper, China estimates that the country disbursed approximately 4.7 billion USD in grants, 1.1 billion USD in interest-free loans, and 7.3 billion USD in concessional loans between 2010 and 2012 (2014). However, from my calculations

using the White Paper aid definition and the AidData database, I find that China's aid disbursements are consistently lower: 2.8 billion USD, 125 million USD, and 6.2 million USD respectively. The reason behind such overestimation is difficult to determine, however. The country perhaps overestimates to assert more dominance in the global foreign aid system and economy or simply does not disclose its aid data to the public as we saw in section two with transparency issues.

Looking at the restrictiveness index, Brautigam consistently ranks number one as the highest estimated total of aid while the OECD DAC consistently ranks last with the exception of 2011 (see above). The other three definitions do not rank in any one position consistently. Additionally, whether using the average ranking or the mode, the definitions are still placed in the same restrictiveness ranking. However, if we look at the definitions by inclusivity of categories based on **Table 1**, we might expect the index to be otherwise.

One issue that emerges from this analysis is that aid data and reporting according to the DAC definition focuses on monetary forms of aid such as grants and loans. Many global South countries give aid-in-kind and other forms of non-monetary aid. The implication of using the ODA definition over proxies developed for global South donors is that a significant proportion of in-kind aid would not be counted. For example, Cuba was the first to give aid in Haiti by establishing medical facilities and rebuilding hospitals after the earthquake in 2010 (Fawthrop

2010). In addition, Haiti and Cuba signed a medical cooperation agreement in 1998 and health workers from Havana staff many hospitals in the country (ibid). Such medical assistance, which would be counted as aid if Brautigam's terms were applied to Cuba, is often not recognized by Western standards not only because it is not monetary aid, but also because it comes from a global South donor and thus not reported in ways that are legible to the dominant donor bureaucracy. In this case of China, which undertakes significant in-kind forms of aid, the inability to recognize and count those forms further under-represents Chinese aid and perhaps also occludes a different development philosophy from dominant Western donors (Ramo 2004; Williamson 2012).

Finally, we see that aid is not a static measure but rather a moving target, as is evident from the varying definitions assessed and the desire of the DAC to expand their definition of aid through the weighting system discussed in Section 2. Measures of aid can encompass different flows at different points in time, whether to reassert dominance or to meet suggested global targets. China perhaps is hesitant to join the DAC due to such stringent and restrictive definitions and importantly, the lack of recognition for non-monetary aid and aid-in-kind, which the country disburses on a large scale.

## V. Conclusion

In order to represent a country's foreign aid accurately, researchers need be able to identify flows and determine whether these flows primarily for development abroad. This paper explored the various governmental definitions and scholarly proxies that have been created to assess the largest emerging market donor, China. Based on a detailed reading of the scholarly debate on what counts as aid, I was able to created a restrictiveness scale that assess how the differing definitions performs relative to each other. Developing such a scale to add to geographers' (and other scholars') toolboxes for further research is vital in constructing more accurate accounts of an increasingly complex foreign aid landscape. Before scholars propose strong binary distinctions – for example, like the so-called Beijing Consensus in contrast to the Washington Consensus (Ramo 2004) – we must first gain better analytical purchase on the various ways that China and other global South donors view development cooperation and engage in it. This assessment contributes to evidence-based assessments of China's growing role in the world as an aid donor, while also demonstrating the need for more sensitivity to qualitative differences in aid (such as in-kind assistance) distributed from donors that operate in global South contexts.

With the One Belt, One Road Initiative positioned to be the world's largest development program in the near future, including countries that make up one-third of the

world's GDP, China might now be in the position to shift views on the global development aid system and begin to create a more encompassing definition of aid to be used by the next generation of major donors (Phillips 2017). A better understanding of the varying ways of counting foreign aid will surely assist in more accurate representations and comparisons of aid data and a greater acceptance of and focus on non-traditional, non-DAC aid definitions can foster more cooperation in the current system of foreign aid.

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### **About the Author**

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