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Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Ileana Daniela Serban & Andrea Betti (2023). 'Has Spanish international development and aid policy done *more with less*? Crisis, horizontal cooperation and complexity'. *Third World Quarterly* 44:12, 2498-2515, DOI: [10.1080/01436597.2023.2242793](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2242793)

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# **Has Spanish international development and aid policy done 'more with less'? Crisis, Horizontal Cooperation and Complexity**

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## **ABSTRACT**

By approaching the question of complexity in international development through governance lenses, this article proposes the use of complexity as an innovative and enabling framework for understanding how policy practices emerge in international development and their use gets to be consolidated by actors that learn in an adaptive way from their policy environment.

In order to apply this conceptual framework, we discuss the case of Spanish international development. Thus, we aim to understand and explain the policy journey through which Spain has started to use new policy practices related to horizontal cooperation with emerging donors in Latin America. The article proceeds by first analysing the political discourse of the Spanish government on international development. Second, the analysis triangulates the initial findings with information coming from peer reviews and survey data, analysing the impact and perceptions of Spanish international development policies.

The analysis shows the relevance of a complexity approach when analysing international development governance mechanisms and emerging policy

practices. This sheds light on the challenges of the related learning journey, with potential relevance across policy topics in international development.

## **KEY WORDS**

complexity in international development, adaptability, governance, policy practices, Spanish aid and development policies

## **INTRODUCTION**

International development has arguably been considered as a policy arena dealing with wicked or complex problems, touching upon different and interconnected policy questions, and needing to account for a wide range of relevant actors and institutional structures (Geyer and Rihani, 2010). This article proposes the use of a complexity approach as an innovative and enabling conceptual framework for understanding how policy practices emerge in international development and their use gets to be consolidated by actors that learn in an adaptive way from their policy environment (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Coveney and Highfield, 1995; Dooley, 1997; Eoyang and Holladay, 2013). By doing so, the article approaches the question of complexity in international development through governance lenses (Beeson and Zeng, 2018; Mazower, 2012; Stephen, 2014; Weiss, 2013), looking at emerging policy practices and at how these get to be consolidated and their use leveraged within the system. Therefore, the article raises the importance of looking at international development actors as adaptive actors (Dooley, 1997; Lehmann, 2018) that learn through feedback loops and, as a consequence, hone their use of new policy practices through designing and implementing international development policies and programmes.

This has the potential to unveil the challenges of such a learning journey and unpack the analytical and policy implications of accounting for the wickedness of development governance. Moreover, it allows to go beyond accounting solely for the complexity of policy topics in international development, such as, dealing with poverty and inequality (Geyer and Rihani, 2010), in order

to start accounting for the complexity of introducing innovative policy practices that can be used across policy areas. The approach deployed in the current study builds on existing efforts aiming to highlight the importance of understanding the evolving nature of governance mechanisms in international development, looking at the changing nature of the interactions between existing and emerging donors (Serban, 2021a). To these existing approaches, the article adds a refined and dynamic understanding of the complexity behind the use of new policy practices in international development. It, thus, analyses how such use gets to be enabled or questioned depending on feedback loops and leading to potential unintended consequences.

We discuss the case of Spain through the lenses of its policy journey while consolidating the use of emergent policy practices aiming for horizontal cooperation in international development and aid. We start by introducing the conceptual tools of complexity that can help us to unpack the learning journey of international development actors in the use of new policy practices. In this context, we discuss the complexity of development governance by looking at emergence through feedback loops and the related unintended consequences (Dooley, 1997), combining a systemic view with an account of the role played by policy agents.

We then introduce our case study, looking at Spain as an adaptive actor in international development. We identify and analyse the way in which Spain has started to use new policy practices related to horizontal cooperation between existing and emerging donors. The analysis is based on an examination of the Spanish government's political discourse over the last decade. Subsequently, we triangulate this analysis with the information coming from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) peer reviews of Spanish international development policy and with data on the changes in perceptions on Spanish international aid development contained in the AidData *Listening to Leaders Survey*. Finally, we conclude on the relevance of a complexity approach when analysing international development and aid governance mechanisms more generally, and emerging policy practices, more specifically. This allows us to open a space of reflection on the challenges of the related learning journey, with potential relevance across policy topics in international development.

## **A COMPLEXITY APPROACH IN THE CONTEXT OF AID AND DEVELOPMENT GOVERNANCE**

‘Complexity is a way to understand life as living systems comprised of relationships, patterns, processes and context’ (Johnson, 2015, p. 151). Over the last few decades, complexity has been used as a set of analytical tools deployed to unpack change and continuity in different social sciences areas, including public policy (Geyer, 2003; Geyer and Rihani, 2010; Mitchell, 2009; Morçöl, 2002; Morçöl, 2005; Morçöl, 2012), organisational studies (Dooley, 1997), international relations (Lehmann, 2011) and politics (Jervis, 2012). When applying complexity lenses to public policy, policy has been defined as ‘an emergent, self-organisational, and dynamic complex system. The relations among the actors of this complex system are nonlinear and its relations with its elements and with other systems are coevolutionary’ (Morçöl, 2012, p. 9).

Therefore, the complexity of policies has been linked to the importance of adaptability. This is because policy actors have been understood as acting within complex systems that are made up of several policies, rules and institutional structures which evolve and interact in nonlinear ways. Thus, complex systems produce system effects that refer to interactions through which ‘the impact of variables [...] is not additive’ (Jervis, 2012, p. 410). Along these lines, no systemic predictability can be achieved by summing up the parts of complex systems (Capra, 2005). As their processes and interactions are not linear, complex systems assume a certain degree of ‘incompressibility’ (Coveney and Highfield, 1995, p. 37). This is similar to a living organism, as ‘different interpretations, diverse interests, uncertain responses, clumsy adaptations, learning and mistakes are what keeps a system healthy and evolving’ (Geyer, 2003, p. 30).

Yet, the role of policy actors should not be overlooked within such systems. Even if they cannot control the system effects (Fullan, 2003; Page, 2009), they do ‘influence almost everything’ within complex systems (Johnson, 2015, p. 151). In this sense, the interaction between the elements of a complex system is led by feedback loops that can create unpredictability, thus putting uncertainty at the core of the whole system (Eoyang and Holladay, 2013). However, feedback loops can also lead to adaptability, making the system an adaptive one. This, in turn,

requires the actors within it to leverage the use of feedback loops in order to adapt and learn from the other actors and the broader policy environment.

Therefore, feedback loops are often portrayed as interaction effects between actors within the system, between these actors and third actors in the broader policy environment, or between actors and their institutional setting. In this context, feedback loops can also be understood as leading to policy behaviours that can 'change the environment of action' (Jervis, 2012, p. 393) through, for example, the use of emergent policy practices that are better fitted to address the sensed need for change. Feedback loops become the source of emergence as a feature of complex systems. Thus, policy systems can be thought of as encountering their source of change at the micro level of agents or policy actors that, by interacting, can 'generate complex emergent patterns at the macro level' (Morçöl, 2012, p. 67). Such emergent macro patterns or policy practices 'persist despite continual turnover in their constituents' (Holland, 1998, p. 7).

Moreover, the use of new policy practices can subsequently lead to potential unintended consequences, seen as 'long-term or secondary effects of an action [that] differ from the intended effect' (Jervis, 2012, p. 393). Therefore, unintended consequences provide a second source of unpredictability within complex adaptive systems, leading to either preventing or reinforcing the use of new policy practices.

When approaching public policy through the complexity of its governance mechanisms, policy practices can be understood as general principles or 'policy ideas' which stand at the foreground of the policy process (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993; Orbie et al., 2016; Serban, 2021b). Policy practices showcase ways in which policies get to be negotiated, their content agreed on and implemented through concrete programmes. This understanding of policy practices builds on complexity lenses looking at how 'actors shape the environment just as they are shaped by it' (Jervis, 2012, p. 398).

The triangle – feedback loops, unintended consequences, and policy practices – can be used to unpack the complexity of governance mechanisms. More concretely, it is useful to look into how new policy practices emerge, which

are the related feedback loops that enable or prevent their use, and the unintended consequences that start manifesting within the system (Jervis, 2012). Such unintended consequences can be related to both actors and structures. In terms of structures, the use of new policy practices can eventually lead to increased complexity, therefore making institutional frameworks harder to navigate. In relation to actors, we can think of limited legitimacy in the use of specific policy practices, questioning the relevance of the participation by specific actors in concrete institutional frameworks. This means that the three elements that exist within complex systems (feedback loops, unintended consequences, and policy practices) show how complexity can be used and deployed (in an intended manner or not) by policy actors in general and policymakers in particular.

As one of the policy systems arguably displaying an increasing number of actors, but also evolving and dynamic institutional frameworks, we analyse international aid and development as a complex system. This is because, when using complexity lenses, we can see 'development as an uncertain, open-ended, and long-term process driven by a large number of interactions that generate self-organised stable patterns capable of adaptation' (Geyer and Rihani, 2010, p. 137). Given the complexity of the system within which they intervene, international development actors learn about the system through feedback loops and aim to manage its uncertainty by adapting their policy practices (Eoyang and Holladay, 2013; Geyer, 2003; Serban, 2021b). The use of such new policy practices can lead to unintended consequences, enabling or preventing actors from achieving their objectives.

In this context, our study builds on previous analyses of international development and aid through complexity lenses such as those of Rihani (2002), Ramalingam (2005), and Ramalingam and Jones (2008). They have highlighted the importance of accounting for the nonlinearity of development interventions and interconnectedness of 'elements and dimensions involving adaptive agents [leading to] complex relationships and processes' (Ramalingam and Jones, 2008, p. 61). Acting within complex adaptive systems, international development actors are seen in this context as needing to change 'in response to shifting conditions' and to adapt effectively in order to 'improve the chances of survival' (Rihani, 2002,

p. 8). Unless acknowledging this dynamic interaction with their system, international development actors are doomed to failure in their attempts of making an effective use of aid budgets.

Within the last two decades, and in a landscape of different global crises (economic, migration and health related), aid effectiveness and policy coherence for development have indeed become central to the debate on how the international development system should change and adapt. Such agenda has been framed in the Paris Declaration (2005), the Accra Agenda (2008) and the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (2011). It has showcased the need to transcend traditional top-down approaches. The main goal has been to make a better use of the existing resources (Hoogvelt, 2001) and renew existing policy practices to encourage and increase the ownership of the policy solutions by the beneficiaries of aid (OECD, 2012). New policy practices have aimed to account for the emergence of new donors (Gray and Gills, 2016) through, for example, South–South cooperation. This has enabled middle-income countries to share ‘knowledge, skills, expertise, and resources to meet their development goals through concerted efforts’ (UNOSSC, 2019, online) while requiring donor governments to align their contributions in social, economic, and environmental matters, and entailing the engagement of actors who were traditionally far from the realm of development cooperation and had different and even conflicting interests.

These efforts of global coordination between development actors to increase policy coherence for development can be related to the literature on global governance. Global governance is defined as ‘the combination of informal and formal values, rules, norms, procedures, practices, policies, and organisations of various types that often provides a surprising and desirable degree of global order, stability, and predictability’ (Beeson and Zeng, 2018, p. 1963). However, by adopting a complexity approach, we differ from this understanding of development governance in two main ways. First, we do not embrace the idea of predictability, but, on the contrary, we relate it to adaptability. Second, we understand the link between policies and practices in a much more dynamic and interdependent way, i.e., being conditioned by feedback loops.



We account for this by focusing our study on the decade in which the sustainable development goals (SDGs) were defined and started to be pursued, that is from the early to the late 2010s. This agenda features the interconnectedness of its policy goals, while its targeted audience includes both developed and developing countries, joining efforts in the pursuit of common goals. Our study aims to look at the complexity of international development governance and learn about the emergence and consolidation of policy practices for horizontal cooperation to increase aid effectiveness and policy coherence. Consequently, this time setting appears appropriate and a fertile ground of analysis (Lu et al., 2015; Nilsson et al., 2016).

We look at the case of Spain as one of the international development actors that has started to adapt its policy practices through the use of feedback loops, while facing unintended consequences during this adaptation journey. Spain benefits from an arguably strong relation with other actors within the aid system (OECD, 2016; OECD, 2022). Therefore, this case is useful to understand how a complexity approach to aid and development governance can be particularly enabling, especially when analysing how emerging policy practices were deployed and their use strengthened. This also allows us to problematise the role of feedback loops and the related unintended consequences.

Our analysis can have consequences beyond the relation of Spain with countries and regional actors in Latin-America. However, our study will inevitably gravitate around this particularly important dimension of Spanish international aid. This is due to Spain's privileged, yet evolving, relation with policy actors in the region (Bianculli, 2020).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The first step of our empirical analysis was to analyse the Spanish government's political discourse on the basis of 572 primary sources<sup>i</sup>, including speeches, electoral programmes, public interviews, press conferences, articles, statements, hearings before the Parliament, and governmental documents about foreign policy and cooperation, authored by the Head of Government, Mariano Rajoy, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, José Manuel García-Margallo and Alfonso

Dastis, the Secretaries of State for International Cooperation and Latin-America and for International Cooperation and Development, and the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation and Development (AECID).

The documents included in the final analysis were published between November 2011 and June 2018. This covers a time period within which only one political party was in power, the Popular Party (PP). This arguably helps us to identify and analyse the complexity of sustained governance efforts over almost a decade. This time frame also allows us to look at how Spain consolidated its use of policy practices related to horizontal cooperation in the context of the emerging SDGs agenda.

Data was analysed through manual coding. The process consisted of two cycles (Miles et al., 2017). First, we divided the documents into units of analysis and classified them by assigning codes. Second, we eliminated redundant codes, by using a holistic technique to sort the macro-codes that we called thematic areas. Then, we used a focused coding technique to identify the most significant codes for each thematic area, with the goal of developing ‘the most salient categories in the data corpus’ (Saldaña, 2012, p. 213). By using this methodology, we conducted an exploratory analysis, aimed at ‘identifying key dimensions and mapping the range and diversity’ of our sources (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, p. 214).

In the second section of the empirical part, we triangulated the government’s discourse by relying, first, on the information on the changes in perceptions of Spanish international aid and development policies, contained in two rounds of the *AidData Listening to Leaders Survey* (Custer et al., 2015, Custer et al., 2018). Second, we relied on the information contained in the OECD peer reviews of Spanish international development policy, conducted by Germany and the United Kingdom (UK) in 2016 and by the Czech Republic and Japan in 2022.

## **THE RAJOY GOVERNMENT AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION POLICY**

This section presents the policy narrative that was identified based on the categories and related codes presented in the supplementary material, which were obtained after conducting the analysis of the government's primary sources. The coding process led us into identifying the context in which the use of new policy practices aiming for horizontal cooperation was consolidated in Spanish international development cooperation. Moreover, it led into identifying two feedback loops which are presented in the later parts of this section.

### **The context**

Summarising the findings around the general policy and political context, our empirical analysis revealed that the Rajoy government perceived Spanish international cooperation as in need to adapt to a rapidly changing policy environment through the use of new development practices. Throughout its time in office, the government maintained that cooperation was 'one of the most important instruments of foreign policy' (Spanish Government, 2014, p. 75) and an effective way 'to project Spain in the international community' (AECID, 2013, p. 16). Nevertheless, the government also argued that Spanish cooperation had to be improved, by adopting a culture of 'learning' (AECID, 2014b, pp. 11-12) whose main goals should be 'to reduce the high level of dispersion and increase its efforts to be more effective' (AECID, 2013, p. 26).

On the one hand, institutional learning was deemed necessary to reinforce the international institutional arrangements aimed at achieving aid effectiveness and to implement the international recommendations stated in the SDGs Agenda. Such recommendations asked states 'to transcend, without eliminating, traditional international cooperation policies' (García-Margallo, 2017, p. 387). The government especially referred to the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (SGCID, 2012, p. 26), the 2008 Accra Agenda, and the 2011 Busan conclusions on Aid Effectiveness (AECID, 2014a, pp. 2-4). On the other hand, European states with a long-standing experience in cooperation, such as Germany, France, and the UK were often identified as sources of institutional

learning through their journey aiming to make development policies more efficient (Robles Orozco, 2013b, p. 27).

Coming from a liberal mindset, the government further argued that, to favour the development of prosperous societies, states must encourage the openness and liberalisation of their economies. Cooperation can enable the achievement of this objective since it ‘can attract capitals that create jobs, reduce extreme poverty, and contribute to creating middle-class incomes’ (García-Margallo, 2012a, p. 441). For this reason, the government regularly linked cooperation with the consolidation of free trade and expressed concerns about an international context ‘in which protectionist winds [were] blowing once again’ (Rajoy, 2017b, p. 153).

Along these lines, the government interpreted the Spanish and European economic crises as the result of a global process that affected all traditional donors: ‘all big donors have reduced funds [...] because all developed countries are facing different types of crises’ (Robles Orozco, 2012a, p. 13). Globalisation had favoured ‘a displacement of savings that were traditionally directed towards developed countries and that are progressively heading towards the emerging ones’ (García-Margallo, 2012b, p. 404). This leads to ‘a more decentralised world economy, with an increasing role for [...] emerging economies that demand participation in the global decision-making and want to renew the traditional bases of cooperation, providing their own lessons and resources’ (AECID, 2013, p. 22).

Despite the fact that China, India, Brazil, and other Latin-American countries ‘are not members of the CAD [Development Assistance Committee]’, ‘they can play a very active role, that we will need to consider’ (Robles Orozco, 2013a, p. 20). Therefore, the government argued that such developments required abandoning any paternalistic posture. This meant building interactions based on ‘equality, mutual respect, and shared responsibility’ (Rajoy, 2012b, p. 265), and leaving aside ‘the traditional Northern donor – Southern recipient model’ (AECID, 2013, p. 21).

Due to their cultural and linguistic proximity, Latin-American and Caribbean (LAC) countries were identified as the ideal partners to pursue more

horizontal cooperation practices. 'Great economic and social transformations in a context of remarkable political [...] stability' (Dastis, 2017a, p. 427) had allowed most LAC countries to evolve into middle-income societies, moving 'from recipients of our cooperation to active agents' (Robles Orozco, 2012b, p. 19). As a consequence, the government considered boosting the international awareness about the new cooperation role of middle-income countries as 'a priority' (SGCID, 2014, p. 3).

In terms of financing, horizontal cooperation entailed sharing the costs between Spain and LAC countries, and the Memoranda of Understandings (MOUs) mentioned the principle of *parity*, which referred to the goal of sharing the costs of cooperation (AECID, 2014d). In terms of actors, several references were made to 'public-private partnerships for development' (AECID, 2014d; AECID, 2015c; AECID, 2017b), which had the goal of enhancing the participation of the private sector in cooperation projects to make them more efficient in terms of costs and results, besides including other private and public actors such as Spanish and international NGOs, private universities and foundations (the International and Ibero-American Foundation for Administration and Public Policies, FIIAPP) (Gracia Aldaz, 2014), Spanish Autonomous Communities, (AECID, 2013; Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018), Spanish public universities and, at times, the Spanish Parliament, which was envisaged to play a reinforced role in making the government accountable for cooperation policies (AECID, 2013; SGCID, 2013).

Therefore, cooperation was not withdrawn from the region because LAC countries still presented 'large inequalities, poverty, and lack of social cohesion' (AECID, 2013, p. 22). To ensure the sustainability of its approach, Spain convinced the European Union (EU) to accept 'mechanisms of differentiation, based on income, which allowed to keep working with countries that [were] key for Spanish cooperation' (Robles Orozco, 2012c, p. 30), while also admitting that the social and development reality of middle-income countries was different from that of low-income countries, with more basic development needs. This warranted a diminution of aid, especially in times of scarcity, included a 'plan of responsible withdrawal', and a case-by-case reduction of traditional aid programmes in countries such as 'Argentina, Brazil [and] Chile' (SGCID, 2013, p.

15). Moreover, the drastic reduction in official development aid (ODA) funds was partially offset by the European funds channelled through delegated cooperation, a policy practice through which European funds got to be implemented by Spanish actors (mostly, FIIAPP) in Latin America (Serban, 2021a).

This policy strategy showcases the complexity of governance mechanisms and the need for adaptability in terms of Spanish aid and international development policy practices. The need for adaptability was witnessed both internally, needing to encourage a culture of learning, and externally, needing to learn new ways of interacting with changing actors, such as Latin-American countries becoming middle-income countries, thus no longer having basic development needs. Therefore, the international development system within which Spain needed to consolidate the use of new policy practices was dominated by two main feedback loops. One was initiated by the financial crisis, limiting the budgetary allocation for aid and development. The other was initiated by the emergence of new international donors. Each of them led to the adoption of specific policy practices.

In the following two parts of this section, we analyse the impact of the feedback loops leading to changes in Spanish international development and aid policy. The financial crisis that hit Spain since 2009, together with the Rajoy government's pro-austerity ideas, led the Spanish government to realise its own policy limitations and the need for change to increase aid effectiveness. At the same time, the government interpreted the emergence of the new middle-income countries, especially located in the LAC region, as an opportunity to maximise the impact of Spanish cooperation. Facing dire economic limitations, the government aimed to do more with less by working with countries that had sufficient resources to be able to directly contribute to the design, financing, and implementation of 'advanced cooperation'. The fact that most of these countries were in the LAC region was perceived as an additional opportunity to maximise the impact of Spanish cooperation, by capitalising on a large web of contacts with both public and private institutions.

The financial crisis, together with the austerity measures on whose implementation the EU urged, provided a set of constraints that the government could not avoid. At the same time, the emergence and consolidation of new

potential donors in the LAC region provided a set of incentives that the government interpreted as particularly advantageous for Spanish cooperation. Both these constraints and incentives prompted the government to realising the limitations of existing Spanish development aid policy and the need to review it, aiming for such a policy change to make the use of aid more efficient in terms of costs and results.

### **Feedback loop I: national crisis and economic ideas**

The first feedback loop that supported the government's convictions on the need to introduce new policy practices to plan and implement its aid and international development policies is related to the changing Spanish economic context. Therefore, this feedback loop was the result of an interaction effect between Spain as a donor and international development actor and its national economic context.

The financial crisis that started in Spain between 2009 and 2010 was one of the most profound in recent Spanish history and had important consequences for the evolution of Spanish ODA. In 2009, under the Socialist Party government of President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Spain devoted 0,46% of its Gross National Income (GNI) to international aid. This ODA percentage started to decrease during the last years of the Zapatero government to 0,29% of Spanish GNI in 2011 (OECD, 2023b). ODA was further reduced to around 0,20% during 2012-2018 (OECD, 2023b).

Closely related, when elected at the end of 2011, the PP government led by Mariano Rajoy needed to address the EU Commission's urge to implement drastic austerity measures. These were constantly invoked to justify the massive reduction of up to 75% of the cooperation budget, which kept Spain far away from complying with the recommendations of the international community to devote 0.7% of its GNI to aid and development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015, pp. 3-4). Government members always lamented these decisions and reminded that 'deficit goals required sacrifices' that 'we hope will be temporary' (García-Margallo, 2012, p. 305). This change was presented as an emergency measure

to save the Spanish economy and, ultimately, guarantee the very sustainability of its cooperation policies (Robles Orozco, 2013c).

The government promised that an 'increase in the cooperation budget [...] will come together with economic recovery' (Gracia Aldaz, 2013, p. 13). Nevertheless, it more frequently represented the situation through the expression 'do more with less' (García-Margallo, 2014a, p. 431). Spain had to learn to devise a set of new policy practices, to be able to deal with scarcity and implement changes that could make cooperation less costly and more efficient. The government's liberal economic ideas contributed to reinforcing these convictions. In a context of crisis, states could not fight poverty only through public aid. The new policy practices included counting progressively on the business sector to implement cooperation policies (Gracia Aldaz, 2012, p. 11-13). The government responded to the accusations of left-wing parties criticising the 'privatisation of cooperation' (Robles Orozco, 2015, p. 22) by arguing that, as 'the spearheads of growth and development', businesses will only make cooperation more effective (Rajoy, 2012a, p. 7) and innovative through job creation and technology transfer (Rajoy, 2014, p. 218).

However, the government stressed that a social market, and not a neoliberal model of economy was needed (AECID, 2012, p. 4), ensuring public basic services and giving legitimacy to a vision based on a plurality of public and private actors. The crisis was also seen as an opportunity, as it forced to pluralise cooperation in terms of actors and implementation modalities. Economic scarcity required to move towards more horizontal cooperation practices that could reduce costs and improve effectiveness. By integrating themselves into the world economy, new donors had to become co-responsible with traditional donors to achieve ambitious development goals.

## **Feedback loop II: new donors and new policy practices**

Among the policy practices that were considered necessary for the new cooperation scheme, the government often referred to horizontal modalities of cooperation. These required substituting the top-down donor-recipient approach with policy practices aiming for a more horizontal exchange of knowledge among



all international actors. For the government, all countries should see themselves as 'developing' because 'all [...] have something to improve' (Dastis, 2017b, p. 449). In this context, middle-income countries were portrayed as having gathered enough knowledge to find their own development solutions. This gave them the potential to share their experience with both developing and developed countries.

The government referred to this policy practice as 'advanced cooperation', different from a cooperation aimed to deal with basic problems of development (García Casas, 2018a, p. 25). Thus, the emergence of new donors can be considered as a second feedback loop. This led to the use of new policy practices as the result of an interaction effect between Spain as a donor and international development actor and other actors within the aid and development system, i.e., the new and emerging donors.

To solve the potential contradiction of remaining committed to a region in which it was reducing its aid commitment, the government emphasised the importance of 'the new generation agreements with LAC' based on innovative modalities of cooperation like 'South-South and triangular cooperation, technical support and transfer of knowledge' (AECID, 2015a, p. 23). LAC countries were envisaged to become promoters of such modalities, sharing their expertise and resources with other developing countries.

To pursue these ambitions, the government also used geographical concentration, intended to reduce the reach of Spanish cooperation from 53 to 23 countries. While 7 of these countries were in Sub-Saharan Africa, 4 in North Africa and the Middle East, and 1 in Asia, the majority, that is, 12 countries, were located in LAC<sup>ii</sup> (AECID, 2013, p. 61), where Spain could capitalise on a 'vast web of contacts' (AECID, 2013, p. 29), in terms of institutions and civil society actors. Thus, Spain benefited from a significant 'comparative advantage' in relation to other donors, which increased the possibility of 'a more impactful action' (AECID, 2013, p. 70).

Spain's role in this process was perceived as being that of accompanying middle-income countries in their transition from aid recipients to development partners. This entailed encouraging the ownership of solutions and strategies for development by the LAC partners (AECID, 2018, p. 11), aligning with their own

needs, and conducting joint planification of goals and evaluations of impact and outcomes (AECID, 2018). Dialogue and coordination with governments and civil societies were deemed fundamental to avoid duplications of adopted policies and instruments. Moreover, the government believed that LAC countries should progressively assume the leadership of development programmes in less developed countries: 'many countries have become new partners supporting the development of third countries', through models that 'integrate the solidarity of the South with the South and promote equal relations among partners, in which each country contributes depending on their technical and economic capacities' (AECID, 2014c, p. 26). Consequently, the government strongly endorsed triangular and South-South cooperation. The 2015 *Strategy of External Action* listed 43 operations of triangular cooperation, especially with Mexico and Costa Rica. The document defined Spanish cooperation as 'highly valued in the region for being the most aligned with these modalities and with the necessities of recipient countries' (Spanish Government, 2015, p. 121).

In addition to South-South and triangular cooperation, technical cooperation was the other policy practice that started to gain more importance within the Spanish international development and aid policies. This was not new to Spanish international development strategies. However, it had to evolve from a 'resource-intensive' approach, based on the mere transfer of funds, to a more 'knowledge-intensive' approach (García Casas, 2018b, p. 7). AECID defined contemporary technical cooperation as 'a modality devoted to strengthening the individual and organisational capacities' through the 'provision of know-how in the form of personnel, training, research, and consultancy' (AECID, n.d.). According to this approach, knowledge should not circulate unilaterally, from developed to developing countries. It must become a mutual process in which both Spain and LAC countries learn from each other and become partners in development cooperation (AECID, 2016). For the government, these policy practices provided the appropriate framework to accomplish the goal of using aid in more effective ways.

First, the use of these practices reduced the costs of cooperation. A cooperation based on technical knowledge and the participation of middle-income countries compensated the budgetary reduction of Spanish aid in the LAC

region. Second, these new policy practices promoted aid ownership by middle-income countries as cooperation partners and the alignment with their priorities. Third, they favoured the concentration of Spanish cooperation, in terms of sectors and countries. Fourth, they encouraged the formation of inclusive partnerships for cooperation, by, for example, enhancing the role of businesses, which could act as facilitators in the process of exchanging knowledge with and among developing countries. Ultimately, they enhanced a culture of learning that the government regarded as necessary for contemporary cooperation. For instance, triangular and South-South cooperation 'offered opportunities to learn from Southern countries', and gain 'inputs to enrich Spanish cooperation itself' (AECID, 2013, p. 106). Moreover, regional cooperation served as an avenue for adaptation to new circumstances through for example the continued support to Central America (the Spain-Central America Integration System Fund), and the reinforced role of Ibero-American institutional networks that support knowledge exchange and policy coherence for development, such as SEGIB (Serban and Harutyunyan, 2021).

The government also showed awareness of the difficulties related to these new policy practices. In its view, horizontal cooperation did not simply mean 'joining forces that operate in an independent way' (AECID, 2015b, p. 7). It, rather, consisted of coordinating actions through an intense dialogue, able to identify the responsibility of each of the involved actors. Moreover, it required 'generating trust' and reinforcing 'mutual learning' by agreeing on a set of common criteria to evaluate programme and project results. Finally, to effectively participate in technical, triangular, and South-South cooperation, middle-income countries had to strengthen their capacity to lead on the different phases of ongoing projects (AECID, 2015b, pp. 1-4).

For the government, these challenges could be effectively tackled only if LAC countries enhanced their ability to collect revenue, therefore also reinforcing their ability to create development budgets. This implied improving their revenue collection by fighting against 'tax evasion' and 'fiscal havens' (SGCID, 2012, p. 32). Improving the fiscal capacity of LAC countries was seen as a priority for Spanish international development policy (SGCID, 2015, p. 46) and one of the main goals of its technical cooperation (Dastis, 2017a, p. 428). For this purpose,

LAC countries had to implement reforms to make their economies more appealing internationally by, for example, enhancing the role of the private sector (AECID, 2017a, pp. 127-128). Finally, they had to strengthen their ability to attract foreign investments and develop trade relations (García Casas, 2017, p. 575).

In conclusion, LAC countries had to assume a primary responsibility for cooperation, by integrating themselves better in the world economy and actively contributing to sustainable development. In this sense, the government treated technical, triangular, and South-South cooperation as inherently connected manifestations of a similar trend towards more horizontal policy practices. This was seen as the result of a decentralisation of the world economy, based on a redistribution of resources from developed to emerging and middle-income economies. This reflection on the challenges related to the new international development practices allowed the Spanish government to start envisaging some of the most relevant unintended consequences. However, this was not followed by a similar reflection on how the new approach could challenge Spanish international aid presence and institutional structures. By focusing only on the challenges experienced by the new donors, this reflection did not include the unintended consequences that Spain, as an international donor, would experience, both in relation to its own aid institutional structures and in its interaction with donors and aid beneficiaries.

## **UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES**

### **Changing patterns of interaction, loss of influence and institutional complexity**

To understand the unintended consequences related to the use of these new policy practices, our study triangulated the information that we obtained from analysing the Spanish political discourse with changes in perceptions on Spanish international aid development. Such changes were noted in three rounds of the *AidData Listening to Leaders Survey* (Custer et al., 2015, Custer et al., 2018, Custer et al., 2021). This is a comprehensive dataset in which leaders from developing countries are asked about how influential and helpful each of the donors has been. The dataset is a particularly enabling source for our study given

that it provides 'invaluable insights into how these leaders enumerate their most pressing development priorities, assess the difficulty or ease of getting traction for reforms in their countries, and rate their experiences working with a range of external partners' (Custer et al., 2018, p. 2). In this section, we also analyse the OECD peer reviews of Spanish international development policy conducted by Germany and the UK in 2016 and by the Czech Republic and Japan in 2022 to allow a longer-term retrospective. Thus, we build on insights from Rihani (2002) and Ramalingam and Jones (2008), looking at the nonlinearity between aid policy changes and consequences related to policy perceptions, as well as the adaptability of Spain as an international development actor over more than a decade and in connection with the two feedback loops previously identified.

The AidData datasets focus on 'two demand-side measures of development partner performance: influence in shaping policy priorities, and helpfulness in implementing policy initiatives or reforms' (Custer et al., 2018, p. 27). Looking at the 2015 dataset, Spain notably suffered from the consequences of a global trend: 'development partners that heavily rely upon technical assistance [incurred] an *influence penalty*' (Custer et al., 2015, p. 78). This can arguably be considered as an unintended consequence of horizontal cooperation and related policy practices. The reason is that 'effective provision of technical assistance requires understanding and careful navigation of local contexts where politicians, civil servants, and citizens sometimes have weak incentives to acquire new technical knowledge or skills' (Custer et al., 2015, p. 80). This also means that donors relying on technical cooperation were less able to anticipate local challenges and undesired effects.

Globally, Spain was perceived as a relatively influential donor in the 2018 report, with 41.6% of responses rating Spain as 'quite' or 'very' influential, and as a helpful development partner, with 64.1% of responses rating Spain as 'quite' or 'very' helpful. However, even if scores were high, given the increased number of international development actors, the 2010 decade marked a decreasing trend for Spanish influence and helpfulness as an international donor. While Spain was the 23<sup>rd</sup> most influential donor in 2015, it moved to the 34<sup>th</sup> position in 2018. In terms of helpfulness, Spain moved from the 21<sup>st</sup> position in 2015 to the 30<sup>th</sup> position on 2018.

At the same time, other European donors that have used horizontal and technical cooperation during the same decade, such as Germany, the UK and France, have all improved their ranking on influence (the UK moved from the 16<sup>th</sup> position in 2015 to the 11<sup>th</sup> position in 2018, Germany from the 22<sup>nd</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> in 2018, and France slightly improved its influence moving from the 24<sup>th</sup> position to being the 23<sup>rd</sup> most influential donor in 2018). The same can be observed in relation to helpfulness, with France being one of the countries that improved the most its perceived helpfulness, moving from being the 26<sup>th</sup> most helpful donor in 2015 to being the 14<sup>th</sup> most helpful donor in 2018. Germany moved from the 23<sup>rd</sup> position to the 17<sup>th</sup> position, and the UK from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> position (Custer et al., 2018).

This suggests that adaptability in relation to aid and development policy practices alone cannot compensate for the loss of influence and perceived helpfulness as an international donor. While France did cut on its aid budget and started to use more horizontal and technical cooperation over the same period, the cuts were less significant than in the Spanish case (from around 0.5% at the beginning of the decade to 0.4% in 2015, 2016 and 2017). In the case of Germany, the percentage of GNI spent on ODA increased from 0.5% in 2015 to 0.7% in 2017, and in the UK, it was constant at 0.7% from 2013 to 2017 (OECD, 2023a).

The changing Spanish influence and helpfulness pattern was partly caused by the reduced aid budget over the 2010s decade (Custer et al., 2018). However, this was complemented by another relevant trend that came from the increasingly reduced Spanish presence on the ground. In the LAC context, emerging donors, such as Brazil, boosted their legitimacy, in terms of both increased influence and helpfulness. The trends suggested by the 2018 dataset offer evidence that the new governance arrangements which Spain encouraged over the whole decade through horizontal cooperation, such as South-South and triangular cooperation, led to a relative decrease in Spanish perceived influence. This loss of Spanish influence was filled in by emerging LAC donors such as Brazil. While Brazil was only the 27<sup>th</sup> most influential and 29<sup>th</sup> most helpful donor in 2015, it came much closer to Spain in the 2018 round being the 35<sup>th</sup> most influential and 33<sup>rd</sup> most helpful donor (globally, both countries have lost influence

and perceived helpfulness from 2015 to 2018; comparing influence, Spain was in 2018 only one position ahead of Brazil – on the 34<sup>th</sup> position, and 3 positions ahead in relation to perceived helpfulness – on the 30<sup>th</sup> position). The increasing role of Brazil as a LAC donor is confirmed in the latest 2021 AidData report (Custer et al., 2021), where Brazil is one of the most influential bilateral donors in LAC only after the USA, and the most helpful donor country in LAC after the USA, Norway, and Switzerland.

Globally, in the 2021 report, Spain is the 56<sup>th</sup> most influential and the 47<sup>th</sup> most helpful donor. In comparison, the UK is the 10<sup>th</sup> most influential and the 15<sup>th</sup> most helpful donor, while Germany has the 15<sup>th</sup> position for influence, and the 21<sup>st</sup> position for helpfulness, and France is the 30<sup>th</sup> most influential and the 44<sup>th</sup> most helpful donor (Custer et al., 2021). This leads us to conclude that horizontal and technical cooperation have caused a decrease in perceived helpfulness of many donors. This was evidenced by the slight decrease in helpfulness witnessed by all European countries in the last (2021) dataset. However, some of the European countries (such as Germany and the UK) have constantly improved their perceived influence despite the move towards more horizontal cooperation.

Horizontal cooperation, paired with smaller aid budgets, appear as leading to a loss in Spanish influence and helpfulness globally, and as a donor in LAC. This loss in influence and helpfulness might be considered as one of the most concerning unintended consequences for Spanish international cooperation even in strategic areas such as LAC. While these changes might not be due to a causal relation between the use of new policy practices and the changes in perceptions on Spanish aid, the simultaneous trends can be read together when accounting for Spanish aid from a systemic perspective, whose complexity leads to unintended consequences at different levels of the aid for development system.

The AidData datasets help us to get a grasp of the changing perception on Spanish aid by leaders in developing countries, but for a more comprehensive understanding of these changes, the analysis further triangulates the information with the OECD peer reviews. These documents help to understand additional unintended consequences for the Spanish international development institutions, as perceived by peers in the OECD. These can be considered as challenges

limiting the success of the new Spanish approach to international aid and development. The OECD peers report the need to develop whole-of-government approaches as one of the relevant unintended consequences of horizontal cooperation, when aiming to include a wider range of actors, therefore aiming for policy coherence for development.

On the one hand, the 2016 report highlighted that instruments proposed by Spain to encourage closer cooperation with businesses were not suiting ‘the private sector’s modus operandi, especially in terms of flexibility and ambition’ (OECD, 2016, p. 66). On the other, in the more recent 2022 report, Spanish aid was presented as ‘[speaking] with one voice on key challenges, such as debt forgiveness’ (OECD, 2022, *Findings and Recommendations*, online), and as a strong actor building networks with a whole-of-society vision. As the report highlights, ‘the fact that Spanish co-operation offers a strong localised agenda, working at the community level and with local NGOs, while at the same time providing technical and financial co-operation at the regional and national levels, means that Spain is able to communicate a wide range of needs, encourage political dialogue and amplify voices that may not otherwise be heard’ (OECD, 2022, *Findings and Recommendations*, online). However, this initial success in starting to address the need for more coordination between internal actors is not fully seen into practice given the issues identified by the last evaluation of the Spanish Cooperation Strategic Plan (2022) when stating that the approval of this document did not count on the support of the relevant development actors, including civil society, universities, local authorities, and autonomous communities, therefore recommending better internal coordination when planning such strategic documents that should give a clear and legitimate vision of the Spanish aid and development policy (Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

Additional unintended consequences increasing the complexity of horizontal governance and the need for adaptability have been related by Spanish peers in the OECD to a further challenge. It concerns the goal of measuring the impact of ongoing Spanish programmes and of linking any policy progress and reform to contributions made through Spanish ODA. With an increased number of actors, the Spanish ODA contribution to reform and knowledge sharing became harder to measure. This potentially decreases its



accountability. However, new and more creative mechanisms to share knowledge and increase accessibility for the end user were identified as ways of countering or mitigating this unintended effect (OECD, 2016). Moreover, while Spain's participatory approach to programming aimed to respond to local needs, prioritising has become more challenging. Thus, focus was perceived as being sacrificed to allow the consolidation of local ownership and flexibility (OECD, 2022).

In conclusion, the changes in perception of Spanish aid influence and helpfulness by developing countries can be considered as a first set of unintended consequences. At the same time, when starting to use horizontal governance arrangements, the increased institutional complexity (whole-of-government/whole-of-society approaches, more creativity when measuring impact, less focus to allow local ownership) can be considered as flagging unexpected and unintended responses from the other policy actors and the broader international development policy environment. This would arguably lead to the need for further changes and could require further adaptability and flexibility from Spain as an international aid actor.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The article has looked at how a complexity perspective on governance arrangements in international development can be an enabling conceptual approach to unpack how and when renewed policy practices might be deployed by international development actors. Focusing on feedback loops and unintended consequences to learn about the adaptability of aid and development actors, the study unveils several findings with consequences for policy topics across areas in international development (such as those comprised under the SDG agenda).

The case study on Spanish international development has allowed us to observe that feedback loops enabling the emergence and consolidated use of new policy practices appear as both interaction effects between actors within the system and between actors and their institutional setting (Eoyang and Holladay, 2013; Geyer, 2003; Serban, 2021b). We have therefore observed that feedback loops can indeed lead to policy behaviours that can 'change the environment of

action' (Jervis, 2012, p. 393) using new policy practices that are better fitted to address the need for change, therefore highlighting the adaptability of international development actors (Geyer and Rihani, 2010). The examples of main policy practices that were identified in this study include triangular and technical cooperation. Feedback loops identified in the Spanish case study included economic factors (the financial crisis) and changes experienced within emergent donor countries and regions.

In our analysis, these were mainly related to Latin America, with most of its countries moving from low-income recipients to middle-income providers of aid. Such feedback loops have been analysed as sources of emergence for international development governance, accounting for the complexity of the system. Therefore, changes initiated at the micro level of emerging donors consolidating their role within their regions were envisaged as a source of emergent patterns with long term effects at the macro level (Holland, 1998; Morçöl, 2012). Through these patterns, the use of new policy practices such as triangular and technical cooperation based on horizontal dialogues and cooperation gets to be consolidated for present and future interactions between Spanish and Latin American actors.

Concerning the unintended consequences when starting to deploy new policy practices in international development, changing patterns of interaction, loss of influence and institutional complexity were identified through the empirical analysis as the main examples of unforeseen system effects. These are particularly interesting findings that lead to several conclusions. First, the use of new policy practices can indeed have structural consequences, increasing complexity and making institutional frameworks harder to navigate (Eoyang and Holladay, 2013; Geyer, 2003; Jervis, 2012; Serban, 2021b). The legacy of the crisis and the rise of horizontal cooperation in Spanish aid policy show both the adaptability of Spain as an international development actor, and the constraints that Spanish cooperation will continue facing in relation to its perceived influence and helpfulness at the international level. Second, in relation to actors, more established donors might lose influence and new patterns of interaction might emerge with leadership from a new set of actors. In our study we have analysed the Brazilian example in Latin America, concluding that Spain is losing influence

in comparative terms after the introduction of the new policy practices aiming for more horizontal cooperation (Custer et al., 2015, Custer et al., 2018). Third, and equally important, a complexity perspective to the analysis of policy practices in international development allows us to unpack policy continuity and change. However, such a systemic view is the result of an analytical effort rather than the way in which policymakers perceive and plan their responses when facing constraints, such as economic crises, or identifying leverage points, such as the emergence of new donors.

Being the first study to attempt the use of a complexity approach to unpack governance arrangements in international development, the article also has several methodological implications. It shows that a complexity approach to the study of governance arrangements in international development encourages the use of a wide range of primary and secondary resources, with triangulation of information becoming of paramount importance. The study has shown that discourse analysis, survey results, as well as peer reviews can be relevant and enabling sources of information. Similar approaches can be deployed in future studies looking at how adaptability and emergence happen in specific policy areas within the international development aid system seen as a complex policy system.

### **Notes on contributors**

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<sup>i</sup> A selection of the primary sources used in this study is available in the Supplementary material.

<sup>ii</sup> Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, and the Dominican Republic.

## Acknowledgements

N/A

## Funding information

N/A

## Disclosure statement

N/A

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