

Development Assistance and Communication: The Case of the Taiwan International Cooperation and Development Fund



Colin Alexander

This article argues that international development assistance projects are an ideal way for governments to communicate social values to international audiences and also to consolidate support or seek legitimacy from its domestic public. The case study for this article is the Taiwan International Cooperation and Development Fund. The text argues that this organization should sit at the forefront of the Taiwan government's communications strategy because of recent trends in political communications and also circumstances specific to Taiwan's domestic and international political situation. The research found that the ICDF has taken on more political communications responsibilities in recent years as a result of changes in Taiwan's international political circumstances and the evolution of a democratic society at home. KEYWORDS: political communications, development assistance, Taiwan.

GOVERNMENTS AROUND THE WORLD WOULD HAVE THEIR AUDIENCES BELIEVE that their commitment to international development assistance reflects their congruence with international legislation and norms of behavior and a philanthropic desire to see extreme poverty eradicated. However, international development assistance plays a deliberate and often understated role in the consolidation of the source government's power and influence over its audience. This is by no means an innovative concept: Carol Lancaster's authoritative text on foreign aid established that governments have a variety of reasons for offering assistance to publics in the underdeveloped world beyond a virtuous concern for those in need. These include adherence to internationally established development goals, national political and economic motives, and domestic political concerns.¹

Accordingly, international development assistance has the potential to operate as an effective communications device for a contemporary government. This is largely because we live in an era where control of the information environment is vital to political ambitions. However, the associated increase in communications bureaucracy can lead to greater public uncertainty and mistrust of political elites. Moreover, advances in communications technology have meant that it is increasingly difficult to separate domestic and international audiences. This has resulted in the propagation

of more generic communications, which often try to speak to everybody, yet nobody, simultaneously. Consequently, greater emphasis is now being placed on deeds within political communications strategy, resulting in an increasing focus on the communications potential of international development assistance.

The case study for this article is the Taiwan International Cooperation and Development Fund (ICDF). I argue that there is considerable evidence to suggest that this organization is a communications vanguard to the domestic and international political priorities of the Taiwan government. The ICDF continues to take on more political communications responsibilities as a result of changes in Taiwan's international political circumstances and the evolution of a democratic society at home. Next, I further discuss political communications, implicit communications, and international development assistance. I then provide a brief contextual overview of Taiwan's political communications history. Finally, I discuss the ICDF in depth, arguing that its importance to Taiwan's communications output should not be underestimated.

The Political Communications of International Development Assistance

We might live in the age of information, but we also live in the age of political claptrap, of empty language. Gerald Sussman provides some reasoning for this when he argues that "the maintenance of the corporate state requires an intensification of public persuasion through various forms of promotional speech and text in order to divert citizens from the cognitive dissonance that follows the unwillingness of the neoliberal state to protect public interests."² As such, more resources need to be spent on political communications if the state is to convince publics of their value as citizens rather than just consumers. Indeed, the post-Cold War neoliberal world has witnessed a commodification of culture, the further off-loading of services that were once the responsibility of the state to civic and corporate responsibility, and a system of mass communications that tries to appeal to everybody, yet nobody, simultaneously. Therefore, it is highly implausible that states would undertake international development assistance based on philanthropic concerns when they are barely inclined to assist their own populations. Rather, development assistance should be seen as a political tool from the same box as other carrot-and-stick measures that international actors use to achieve their political and economic desires.

Furthermore, governments are increasingly run like businesses. They employ spin doctors, undertake branding initiatives, perform reputation management, and are increasingly subservient to corporate industry rather

than the people to which they remain accountable (at least within democracies). Moreover, calls for transparency mean the publication of accounts, much like a public limited company, and subsequent scrutiny and justification of expenditure. Therefore, it follows that the funding of international development assistance should be in line with the economic and political interests of the source, if the government is to avoid accusations of financial mismanagement or haemorrhage.

On this topic, Adam Habib argues that “ultimately, it would [be] prudent for advocates of African development (from all sides) to recognise that all countries involved in Africa are here to advance their own national interests, and any harbouring of contrary illusions can only result in future disappointment.”³ Therefore, according to Habib, while outright plunder cannot occur as it once did, the benefits that such developed world assistance has for these publics is subordinate to their self-interests. As such, “win-win” or “mutual benefit” are terms often heard around modern international development assistance projects. This emphasizes the extent of the economic accountability that governments must emphasize to its audiences in the neoliberal age.

Nevertheless, development assistance relies on philanthropy at least at the grassroots level of delivery and so awareness of the organization’s wider political tasks might sit uneasily with employees who consider poverty alleviation to be the primary goal. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is one of the largest and most famous development assistance and foreign aid organizations in the world. It has also been a mentor of sorts to the Taiwan ICDF. JICA provides development assistance and foreign aid to underdeveloped countries around the world and is part of the political communications outreach of the Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). JICA performs a number of communications functions within wider government objectives, including the repair of Japan’s international image after World War II, participation in the resolution of international crises despite military sanctions against Japan, persuasion of governments in the underdeveloped world to back a permanent Japanese seat at the UN Security Council, rebuilding the confidence of the Japanese people post-World War II; and helping to secure a ready supply of finite energy resources.⁴ The JICA example emphasizes the extent to which international development assistance organizations look to appeal to a mixture of domestic and international audiences beyond the immediate recipients of their output. However, in recent years, JICA has been criticized for what Jun Morikawa calls a “credibility gap” between its rhetoric of development assistance and the organization’s clear political and economic intentions, leading to heightened distrust of the organization among domestic and international audiences.⁵

Taiwan

Pal Kolsto refers to Taiwan as the “extreme success story”⁶ of what are termed “quasi-states.”⁷ However, barring a few exceptions such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, Taiwan cannot participate in international organizations, its segregation being assured by the international power and influence of the People’s Republic of China (hereafter, China), with which it has had a dispute over sovereignty since 1949. Thus, while Taiwan is a wealthy country by international standards, fulfills most of the criteria of secessionism, enjoys healthy relations with several major world powers, and has a diplomatic corps that confidently publicizes both the former and the latter, it remains internationally isolated. Under such constraints, the Taiwan government’s ability to communicate with the outside world and with the people within its own borders is crucial to the state’s very existence. This is in contrast to most other political entities that do not have such comprehensive diplomatic hostility to deal with and, therefore, can work on a more elaborate level.

Taiwan’s relations with China form much of the backdrop for Taiwan’s forays into development assistance and foreign aid. Garth Le Pere argues that it was the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955 between a host of Asian and newly independent African states that instigated the initial push by China (and shortly after, by Taiwan) toward development assistance in the underdeveloped world. This was largely part of China’s attempt to join the UN, but also reflected its desire to become the leader of the Non-Aligned Group of states that developed during the Cold War. China’s engagement consisted of

agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries, textiles and other light industries, energy, transportation, broadcasting and communication, water conservation, public and civil construction, education and health. Some of the flagship projects included the 1860km Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA), the Port of Friendship in Mauritania, the 122km Canal of Friendship in Tunisia, the International Convention Centre in Cairo, and an 80,000 capacity stadium in Kinshasa.⁸

Beyond this we also see a degree of military and education diplomacy, financial aid, and state bribery from both Taiwan and China as they competed for international allies. Thus, Taiwan’s investment in international development assistance should be seen as part of its wider international ideological competition with China, with fluctuations in its output and emphasis somewhat related to changes in relations between the two adversaries.

At present, Taiwan and China are enjoying a period of amicability and this is reflected in Taiwan’s development assistance being more concentrated on poverty alleviation in the underdeveloped world. However, when relations deteriorated, for example, during the presidency of pro-Taiwan

independence leader Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008), political aspects of development assistance became more visible. As such, analysis of development assistance output can be a significant indicator of wider political currents involving China and Taiwan.

International development assistance is a good way for a government to improve its international and domestic image since it is less likely to incur the inquisition that is bestowed on much of the empty language that so many governments disseminate with ease today. However, for marginalized governments, it is more attractive given their preoccupation with international and domestic sovereign legitimacy. As such, development assistance allows marginalized governments to contribute to international projects like the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) while not being members of the international organization under discussion. This, in turn, provides the government with international prestige and domestic compliance because of its consistency with the prevailing values and practices of the international system.

Apart from Taiwan, Cuba is another notable example of a marginalized national government with extensive international development assistance and aid projects. On Cuba's renowned program of foreign medical aid, Michael Bustamante and Julia Sweig assert that "Cuba . . . has long used foreign aid to garner international support. Yet it is not aid in and of itself that acts as a public diplomacy asset but, rather, the particular way in which it is deployed, marketed and received as part of a greater humanitarian social project."⁹

Thus, Cuba uses foreign aid, and medical assistance in particular, as part of its political communications outreach to engage beyond those people receiving treatment and create greater leverage with a host of domestic and international audiences. Taiwan, like Cuba, Japan, and other countries with prominent development assistance and foreign aid agencies, selectively uses its provision as a political tool. Thus, it is possible to track this practice against the country's political and economic priorities.

Taiwan and China have enjoyed a period of positive relations since the Kuomintang (KMT) national party returned to power under President Ma Ying-jeou in 2008. This began shortly after Ma Ying-jeou's election win in May 2008, around which time a "diplomatic truce" was agreed between the two sides. The diplomatic truce has prevented countries from switching their recognition between Beijing and Taipei, and arguably has facilitated the most meaningful dialogue between Taiwan and China since the split in 1949. Under these conditions, the functions of the ICDF communicate the values of Taiwan to important foreign and domestic audiences, help to counter the political communications of China in regard to its diplomatic claim to Taiwan, and alleviate the pressure that the Chinese exert on Taiwan's formal diplomatic allies to abandon their allegiances with Taipei. Thus, while not being under the direct control of a government communications department,

the ICDF reinforces Taiwan's communications priorities both domestically and internationally, and offers a consistency in its communications output through turnovers of political power that have the potential to drastically alter the emphasis of other governmental departments.

The Research Framework

This article is the culmination of several years of my intermittent research into the Taiwan ICDF and the political communications of international development assistance and aid organizations. I conducted ten in-depth semistructured interviews with ICDF staff between 2011 and early 2013, and spent some time with staff observing their grassroots engagement with local people in foreign countries. Not all of the interviews have been used in this article. The interviewees came from across the organization, including the secretary-general, directors, senior managers, heads of the ICDF in different countries, engineers, and volunteer staff. This allowed for the development of a comprehensive understanding of the structures and politics within the organization and their priorities at different levels. I am grateful for the time provided by all of those concerned.

The Taiwan International Cooperation and Development Fund

The ICDF is Taiwan's primary international development assistance agency. It has a permanent presence in twenty-one of Taiwan's twenty-three formal diplomatic allies and several other missions in other countries around the world, including Bahrain, Ecuador, Kenya, Libya, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, and South Sudan.¹⁰ The ICDF projects are structured into four groups: technical cooperation, humanitarian assistance, lending and investment, and international education and training. The ICDF is also perhaps Taiwan's most publicly transparent government agency and lists of its past and present projects, budgets, and impact assessments can be viewed online.¹¹ Even though Taiwan is not a member of the UN, the ICDF is fully committed to UN MDGs around capacity building in the underdeveloped world. The ICDF was formed in 1996 as part of institutional reforms implemented by the administration of President Lee Teng-hui as Taiwan moved into its postauthoritarian era.¹² The ICDF was the amalgamation of the Committee of International Technical Cooperation (CITC) and the International Economic Cooperation Development Fund (IECDF), and was the culmination of a move that sought to give the new agency greater independence from government.¹³

Taiwan's first foray into international development assistance came in 1959 when it assisted its capitalist ally South Vietnam after the outbreak of the Vietnam War. China was allied with the North Vietnamese. Taiwan's

development assistance advanced in 1961 when it began projects to some of the newly independent African states in a bid to gain diplomatic recognition ahead of China.¹⁴ This was known as Operation Vanguard in reference to its anti-Communist prerogative. Taiwan was still a poor country during the 1950s and 1960s so the money for these projects came from the US Treasury, and was designed to spread capitalist ideology to the peasantry across the underdeveloped world in the hope that it would prevent supposedly Communist insurrection.¹⁵ In line with the Taiwan government's own ideology, Operation Vanguard was tasked with helping the pro-Taiwan governments of these allied countries to stay in power by teaching their peasantry the basics of market economics. As such, the precursors to the ICDF functioned as international political tools for the Taiwan government, their emphases being to create or reward ideological symmetry among the ruling elites and publics of other countries. This meant that development assistance as a public priority was largely a facade.

In light of this, I asked ICDF's deputy director for technical cooperation, Yen Ming-hong, to explain the extent of his organization's international political tasks today:

CA: Do you consider the work that you do to be diplomatic?

YMH: Yes we do, the work that we do is highly related to the diplomatic work of Taiwan. First, the countries that we do our work are mainly allies. They have diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Second, we cooperate a lot with the Taiwan embassies in these countries. In fact, to be honest, we only take projects that come from the Taiwan embassies in these countries. So we take the diplomatic relationship as a serious topic.

CA: So the role of the ICDF is to complement the diplomatic relationship?

YMH: Yes, it is.¹⁶

Thus, we see clear awareness of the ICDF's political role, yet also an acknowledgment that the people executing such tasks have concerns beyond this. I also asked Yen Ming-hong to compare the contemporary ICDF with the agencies that preceded it:

In the 1960s the reason why we were involved in international aid was totally a diplomatic concern. As you know, we are no longer a member of the United Nations, and during that time the Taiwan government tried to keep our allied countries in Africa. So what they came up with was to send out a lot of technical missions to stay there and to provide agricultural assistance in the hope that we can have their diplomatic support. In that time, we were not focused on the results of the projects. We did not care about the results. We just wanted the support of the local governments. But now we focus a lot more on results, we have to make sure the projects deliver the outcome and impact that they were designed for.¹⁷

Therefore, as African countries experienced significant political, economic, and social turmoil, Taiwan and China began to provide resources. However, the motivation for such provision was more likely to help consolidate the status of favorable political regimes through ideologically weighted projects, rather than humanitarian or philanthropic concern. What is more, as the capacities of Taiwan and China developed, both began to diversify their development assistance work in the underdeveloped world.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the emphasis remained away from increasing human capital or capacity building, although this did happen in some measure, and any positive public sentiment that these actions created was secondary to securing governmental relations. My discussions of the ICDF's different audiences that follow emphasize that this mind-set is by no means absent today, although these concerns have diluted somewhat.

The changes made to Taiwan's development assistance outreach in 1996 encouraged the rebalance of Taiwan's projects toward public deprivation within its remaining formal diplomatic allies. The Cold War had come to an end, China was no longer a Communist protectionist state, and Taiwan was becoming a competitive multiparty democracy with high living standards. What is more, many nation-states in the underdeveloped world were becoming competitive democracies themselves and Taiwan needed to distance itself from the warlords and dictators that it had previously helped keep in power. Although, also a reflection of domestic changes, the KMT's decision to become more democratic was largely one of calculation on the part of the Lee Teng-hui administration based on a changing international environment.¹⁹ With the victory of the United States and its allies in the Cold War, democracy, human rights, and individual freedom had become championed international causes. And given Taiwan's international marginalization, the administration made the decision that the best defense for Taiwan, vis-à-vis an increasingly powerful China, was for the island to champion and participate where possible in the prevailing international political morality. Thus, in its reforms, the Taiwan government's primary development assistance agency became more focused on so-called capacity building, and later on the MDGs as part of an attempt to increase the domestic and international legitimacy of the regime.

The ICDF's Audiences

Although they are by no means mutually exclusive, the ICDF's audiences can be split into four groups, each with their own motivation for being targeted: publics of countries with ICDF missions, elites of formal diplomatic allies, wider international audiences, and Taiwan's domestic audience. Table 1 provides clarity on these audience groups and their reasons for being of interest to Taiwan.

Table 1 Taiwan's Audiences for Development Assistance

Audience	Motivation for Engagement
Publics of countries with ICDF missions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genuine need for assistance • Recognition of their democratic political power
Elites of formal diplomatic allies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued formal diplomatic recognition • Ideological patronage
Wider international audiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create space for positive international discussion of Taiwan • Demonstrates congruence with international projects and norms
Taiwan's domestic audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide an international outlet for a highly skilled population • Consolidates domestic sovereignty

Note: ICDF, Taiwan International Cooperation and Development Fund.

Creating positive sentiment for Taiwan among foreign and domestic publics and elites is therefore one of the ICDF's main prerogatives. That said, the manufacture of image is an important part of many development assistance organizations. However, what separates these agencies in marginalized nation-states from those in less marginalized countries is their admission to focusing less on the direct recipients of their activities (although the extent to which this is actually correct remains in doubt). Thus, while the likes of JICA are tools of statecraft with mandates beyond development assistance goals, the ICDF's open acknowledgment of this demonstrates a governmental approach that is more related to a marginalized administration.²⁰

The Publics of Countries with ICDF Missions

The history of Taiwan's international development assistance leaves little doubt as to the political and ideological motivations of its output. However, recent evidence suggests a degree of movement away from such emphasis, with impetus toward those actually in need of assistance. This is apparent through the ICDF's commitment to the MDGs and so-called capacity building rather than its pursuit of a more singular agenda. One of the best recent examples of the ICDF becoming more mainstream is its recent partnering with the US charity Food for the Poor in its relief efforts in Haiti. According to ICDF personnel in the country, the partnership allowed the two organizations to complement each other's proficiencies and resources and provide a more effective relief operation.²¹ Thus, it was a clear example of human need overtaking concern for political impact. However, this situation was more likely a consequence of the chaotic political situation in postearthquake Haiti that had suspended much of Taiwan's prioritization of political relations.

Nevertheless, the ICDF's movement toward the people of the countries with ICDF missions is also exemplified in the organization's creation of Mobile Medical Missions (MMMs) in 2006. These small land-based medical clinics travel to Taiwan's diplomatic allies offering free medical care, normally for about two weeks at a time, before moving to another country or region. The roving clinics give Taiwan a more regular medical presence than before and demonstrate an adjustment toward the direct needs of the rural poor in these countries. The MMM focus tends to be on rural villages and, given the awkward terrain in which they tend to travel, MMMs number around thirty personnel and carry only equipment and supplies that are easily transportable. In El Salvador, for example, MMMs have focused on treating simple ailments and conducting simple procedures, including providing antibiotics to treat Chagas disease, conducting pregnancy screenings, issuing educational leaflets and advice, and extracting decayed teeth and providing other dental care.

Before 2006 the ICDF partnered with Taiwanese international charities and private nonprofit organizations such as the Tzu Chi Foundation and the Taiwan Root Medical Peace Corps (TRMPC) to provide medical assistance. However, much of this work was focused in cities and involved medical training partnerships, or was in response to natural disasters rather than issues of regular access to health care. In an example of the former, twenty doctors from Chang Gung Hospital in Kaoshiung visited Guatemala from 11 to 24 September 2010 to perform operations and, in the process, train Guatemalan medics in the treatment of cleft palate, liver disease, and liver transplant.²² Examples of the latter include the arrival of the TRMPC with a twenty-three-person team to treat some of those affected by extensive flooding in El Salvador in November 2011 and the Tzu Chi Foundation's assistance in November 2009 to some of those affected by Hurricane Ida across Central America.²³

As such, there is evidence to suggest that the ICDF is becoming more engaged with the publics of the countries where it works. Lin Kuo-chung from the Taipei Representative Office in London puts this down to the democratization of many of Taiwan's formal diplomatic allies: "[Engaging with the public] is more important in a democracy as the government is elected by the people and their views are therefore represented. In a non-democracy [it] is less important."²⁴ However, his statement indicates that it is not the foreign public per se that Taiwan values, but rather its ability to influence those in power. His statement therefore also allows my research to position this audience below that of the other audiences being discussed.

Moreover, while there is little doubt that democratization is a factor in the changes made by the ICDF, the organization's resistance to such change should also be considered since there are examples of the continuing prioritization of political ambitions over public needs in much of the ICDF's

work. On the island state of Saint Lucia, I asked one of the ICDF's health educators about the direction that she had been given by either the ICDF or the Taiwan embassy in Castries regarding her role and objectives. Her answer demonstrates the degree of interest that Taiwan has in the people of Saint Lucia.

CA: How was your teaching structured, were you set targets, were you provided with the necessary equipment to do your job?

ICDF: Actually there was no equipment.

CA: Do you need equipment?

ICDF: Yes, I really need a printer because I need to print out information for the patients. I can show them on my laptop but it is not always safe to go walking around with a laptop. Also they can take the information home with them. There is a Taiwan mission in St. Lucia. The head of the mission was my boss in St. Lucia. However, he said that he is not responsible for us and that we cannot use any equipment in the mission office, including the printer, only in some emergency cases. Also, they don't have printers in the health centres, only one in the local supervisor's office. But it's black and white and it seems to always have problems.

CA: Have you asked for a printer from the ICDF?

ICDF: They say it is not available to me. Also, if I give a talk about obesity I might want to print some pictures or diagrams, but I cannot do this. Also, if I do an exercise activity I might want to print some fliers or some posters. Sometimes it is really hard to work.

CA: When you arrived were you given any targets, and do you work from a set programme that is consistent across the ICDF?

ICDF: No, all by myself, no programme.²⁵

This minimalist approach to the volunteer program, manifest in the lack of resources and direction to those working at the grassroots level was also evident in other countries and other areas of the ICDF's provision. In El Salvador, I interviewed several volunteer ICDF Mandarin teachers in order to discover the extent of the ICDF's investment in the education of those who enrolled in language classes. The following extract is from an interview that I conducted there in 2011.

CA: Have you been set performance targets regarding the uptake of Mandarin courses? If so, what are they?

WYF: No there haven't been any targets. When I arrived there was no textbook on teaching Mandarin to Spanish speakers so I had to ask the embassy for money to buy them. I think that the Taiwan government uses us as a diplomacy tool; they aren't really interested

in the results, just in their relationship with the local government here in El Salvador. They are not really focused on the teaching itself.

CA: So you believe your government's focus on this is part of a show, so they can go to the El Salvador government and say, "look, we are teaching people Mandarin?"

WYF: Yes, exactly. The teaching is not taken too seriously.²⁶

The ICDF discontinued all Mandarin teaching to foreign publics in 2013. The ICDF's decision to do this underlines the extent to which Taiwan prioritizes other audiences ahead of the foreign publics it engages with, with the experiences of volunteer Mandarin teachers overseas demonstrating that the ICDF had little interest in seriously progressing the language skills of those enrolled. As such, while some reforms have been made within the ICDF and there has been recognition of the democratization process within many of Taiwan's formal allies, the ICDF continues to engage with foreign publics largely to the point that they are perceived as useful in meeting greater political ends.

Elites of Formal Diplomatic Allies

Despite the agreement of the diplomatic truce with the mainland in 2008, keeping strong political relations with formal diplomatic governments remains a priority for Taiwan. This is the case for a number of reasons. First, there is recognition on both sides that the truce is largely an informal agreement, respected while it is in the interest of both parties to comply. Second, while diplomatic transfer might not be possible, this does not, and has not, stopped both sides from building economic, social, and cultural relations with the others' allies as well as lobbying parliaments and building patronage between politicians and political parties. And finally, the truce does not prevent proactivity toward China on the part of formal allies themselves. This final point has been evident in Taiwan's recent relationship with Honduras, which has made some not unobvious political maneuvers to distance itself from Taipei during 2013 despite retaining formal ties and which has declared itself open to relations with Beijing.

Influencing the elites of their diplomatic allies in a positive way is the most pressing concern of Taiwan's formal diplomatic output. More specifically, the activities of the ICDF offer Taiwan a chance to assist various foreign government ministries where they cannot, or will not, make domestic social provisions, in the hope that it will improve public opinion toward the incumbent regime in the process. That said, it is not unknown for foreign political elites to direct international development assistance to the public on a political rather than penury basis. However, this is a conflict that fre-

quently exists for all international development assistance and aid agencies in the underdeveloped world and so is by no means unique to Taiwan's predicament.

I asked Yen Ming-hong about Taiwan's conduct in the young democracies that it holds formal relations with:

YMH: What the governments of our allied countries ask of the Taiwan ICDF is really in the interests of the people, but it could be only representing a small group of the people.

CA: OK, here's a hypothetical situation for you. The government of one of your allies asks the ICDF to undertake some projects, but the selectivity of the projects is only to areas that are political strongholds of the government.

YMH: That can be the case. That's true.²⁷

A recent extreme example of such a practice comes from Saint Lucia. After Taiwan's rerecognition by Castries in 2007, the ICDF ran a series of MMM clinics in the constituencies that had United Workers Party (UWP) incumbency (confirmed by an unnamed source). Furthermore, in 2008 Taiwan opened an educational center in the personal office of National Security Minister Guy Mayers (UWP–Castries East). Both incidents demonstrated Taiwan's favoring of the right-wing UWP party and the use of the ICDF as a political tool to influence incumbent political elites.

This practice is not isolated to Saint Lucia. About Taiwan's medical assistance in Guatemala, Third Secretary Daniel Chen said: "We fully cooperate with the Ministry of Health and the First Lady's Office on these projects. We go on their advice and directions as to where to go, even which towns and villages etc. We provide all the equipment and they provide security and part of the transport."²⁸

This quotation emphasizes the extent to which relations with the elites are prioritized above those with the public, the local result being that, by following the recommendations of the Guatemalan government, Taiwan (and the ICDF) do not necessarily assist those most in need but rather those strategically placed around policy objectives. This can be demonstrated in Guatemala through analysis of the locations where the ICDF has carried out medical clinics in recent years. Most apparent is the lack of presence in the poorest regions of the country. Indeed, the ICDF's health care work is almost entirely in majority Spanish-speaking departments—for example, Zacapa, Escuintla, and Jalapa—which have little in the way of indigenous ethnicities and are statistically some of the wealthiest areas of the country. The sizable non-Spanish speaking Guatemalan population, which suffers from some of the most serious poverty levels in the world and is vastly underrepresented in Guatemalan politics, is therefore largely ignored by

Taiwan's development assistance since it prioritizes elite relationships over human need.²⁹

There is, however, some evidence that Taiwan's use of the ICDF for political purposes is waning. Tao Wen-lung, secretary-general of the ICDF, provides some context: "[Previously] in the Solomon Islands [the ICDF have been] asked to go to a constituency and it turn[ed] out that it was the ambassador to Taiwan's hometown. In 2011, 6 months before the [St. Lucia] election, I sent an instruction to every member of the ICDF team saying 'No member of the mission should do anything other than follow the book,'" the protocol. No extra activities. Do not accept any instruction from our embassy to do anything that is not in the agreed framework. I cc'd MOFA on too."³⁰

As such, at the 2011 general election in Saint Lucia, there were no known ICDF extra activities such as those discussed previously. However, the decline of the ICDF as a political tool does not negate to a decline in Taiwan's interest in the elites of these countries. Thus, while there is a suggestion that the ICDF is now less compliant with some of the more unorthodox MOFA demands, there is other evidence to suggest that Taiwan embassies have continued in their attempts to influence elites by their provision of assistance to favorable administrations.

Wider International Audiences

The partial attempt by the ICDF to distance itself from Taiwan's diplomatic culture of influencing the policy of foreign governments, however, by no means implies that the ICDF no longer seeks to communicate with foreign audiences regarding Taiwan. Indeed, Taiwan, like many other countries around the world, has spent increasingly more time considering Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power" and focusing on how to improve its ability to "persuade" rather than "coerce" in the international arena.³¹ Thus, part of Taiwan's soft power strategy has been the utilization of the ICDF with wider international audiences. The announcement of a diplomatic truce in 2008 was the catalyst to the ICDF's efforts to represent Taiwan within the international arena. Prior to the diplomatic truce, Taiwan had asked its formal diplomatic allies to raise the issue of Taiwan rejoining the UN on a near-yearly basis. However, this stopped after 2008. Part of the job of the ICDF therefore has been to create international space for Taiwan by formulating positive discussion about the country's impact in the world. I asked Secretary-General Tao Wen-lung to explain more about this role:

CA: What the ICDF does therefore is about Taiwan's image around the world and also to the people of Taiwan?

TWL: Yes. In the last few years I have done a lot of research into this and I think that we are getting results. For example, I had a call

from an NGO [nongovernmental organization] chief in this country, a medical doctor, saying that our image has widely improved. Now everyone is talking about the ICDF.

CA: So Taiwan is not a member of the UN and many other international organisations, but the work of the ICDF creates international space for Taiwan?

TWL: Yes, especially because we are so constrained diplomatically. We need to utilise options like this more than other countries. To do more of this than the likes of JICA need to do. Taiwan must utilise organisations like the ICDF for this purpose. For example, I just returned from the EDR (Economic Development Research) meeting and they said that the ICDF is a good example of the work that they want to do and I was warmly greeted by a lot of people. A number of East European and Central Asian countries wanted to meet with me.³²

Thus, the ICDF now performs a surrogate role within international fora that attempts to keep the topic of conversation positively about Taiwan. Additionally, the ICDF has been increasingly interested in partnering with other international NGOs and government organizations, also in a bid to increase Taiwan's international space. In El Salvador, for example, the ICDF has partnered with the Catholic Relief Services, an international NGO that undertakes development projects in some of the world's poorest communities, working with local partners in the areas of health, food security, and employment.³³ Whereas in postearthquake Haiti, the ICDF has started a significant ongoing relationship with the US charity Food for the Poor. Regine Liu, humanitarian assistance project manager with the ICDF, explains a little more about the political motivation of this new relationship:

CA: In Haiti and in other countries you are working with NGOs, Food for the Poor for example, why do you do this?

RL: Well each case is different. Food for the Poor is one of the most famous NGOs in the US, they are renowned for their fundraising ability and they have very good relations with politicians. They work closely and have a very good relationship with our representative office in the United States. That's one reason. The second is that our objectives are similar, they want to feed the poor and they work in agricultural projects which produce food.³⁴

As such, working with Food for the Poor partly allows the ICDF and Taiwan further engagement with the political elite of the United States—their stated priority international audience according to Peter Huang, director general of department of policy planning, Taiwan MOFA—while also increasing the possibility of improved public opinion with US audiences.³⁵

The ICDF is therefore a significant part of Taiwan's attempt to influence its soft power among strategically targeted international audiences.

Taiwan's Domestic Audience

Finally, there must be consideration of the domestic audience in Taiwan. The provision of international development assistance and foreign aid can improve the image of the government in the eyes of its own people as being a responsible and compassionate international actor. This is especially the case when the government has challenges to its sovereignty from domestic and international sources such as the situation in Taiwan vis-à-vis China. Thus, how the Taiwanese government asserts Taiwan's image internationally has considerable ramifications for its popularity at home. This is especially so now that Taiwan has entered a postauthoritarian era with genuine rivalry existing in its domestic politics. I asked Secretary-General Tao Wenlung about the ICDF's domestic tasks:

CA: Is the [ICDF's] task also about the Taiwan government's relationship with its own people, about creating political legitimacy?

TWL: That is also important. . . . When I arrived in this post: "we need to be transparent and we need to be well-prepared because if we are not then the President, the people, they will not have confidence in us." We do so many joint ventures now and civil society's understanding is so important.

CA: Is this also about Taiwan moving from dictatorship to democracy?

TWL: It is part of it. We have an obligation in this transition period. You must provide information so that people can make their decisions. But a lot of civil servants are still hesitant about this. They have such bad habits of not providing information. Civil society becomes suspicious and thinks that the government is still doing something that they do not like. So I spend a lot of time out of the office. If I am invited to speak in front of students, NGOs, I will go, because we must seize this opportunity. It is part of democratisation.³⁶

The secretary-general well understood the domestic purpose of the ICDF. Thus, in its communications role, the ICDF works with domestic audiences to improve the stature of Taiwan's government and its international output.

Emphasizing the ICDF's work abroad to domestic audiences began in 2000 after Chen Shui-bian was elected as Taiwan's president. I asked a Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) official to explain why they had decided to emphasize the ICDF:

At that time we started thinking more about the concept of public diplomacy, in terms of getting Taiwanese people to think more about how Taiwan's gov-

ernment has been helping these countries over the previous years through agricultural assistance, medical assistance, other assistance and volunteer work. Because before 2000, few Taiwanese people understood much about Taiwan's allies in Africa, the South Pacific etc. So when Chen made his first overseas trips to Taiwan's allies in Central and South America and Africa—I recall he visited 6 or 7 countries in two weeks—we brought Taiwan media with us and they reported on the extent of the ICDF's work. The Taiwanese people got to know more about Taiwan's work in its allies, and this was the beginning of our attempts to introduce the concept of public diplomacy at home. We believe that foreign policy is an extension of domestic support. We need to let the domestic audience know what Taiwan and the Taiwan government's contribution is to the international system and its international allies.³⁷

Therefore, as Taiwan consolidated its democracy through a peaceful turnover of elected power, the new regime sought to consolidate the democratic process by bringing greater transparency to Taiwan's foreign activities. At the same time, this was an attempt by the government to acquire greater sovereign legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

In addition, the ICDF has tried to encourage the participation of volunteers from all areas of society to engage with their programs. This is about getting more people involved with the ICDF, but also a recognition that Taiwan has developed a highly skilled labor force whose expertise could be diplomatically useful. I asked all of the interviewees from the ICDF a question about why it was important for Taiwan to engage in international development assistance, and all provided the same answer: that Taiwan had a moral obligation to help other countries because it had been very poor in its recent history and had received international assistance. The uniformity of the answer provided is a consequence of the training program provided to new employees and volunteers. Wang Yi-fei, who first volunteered in El Salvador in 2008, describes the training program:

Before I left for El Salvador I had 6 weeks of training by the ICDF. This consisted of 3 hours in the morning of Spanish tuition, and then we had Mandarin teacher training in the afternoon for 2 or 3 weeks. We also received lectures on why volunteering for projects such as this is important. The ICDF used the US Peace Corps and JICA from Japan as examples of good practice. They also brought in people who had volunteered before to share their experiences. This helped to give us some teaching ideas and gave us an inclination as to what was going on in these countries. . . . They said that Taiwan at one point received a lot of international assistance and that this helped us become the successful country that we are now. It is therefore our duty to do the same for other countries, now that we are in a strong position to do so.³⁸

Other interviewees provided variations of the same core statement. Furthermore, this statement emphasizes the extent to which the ICDF has been used to implicitly unify what is otherwise a country struggling with a contested identity, as people from across political and spiritual divides can

relate to these values. Interestingly, the statement is also based on one of the key philosophies of Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Republic of China, who said that “only if we rescue the weak and lift up the fallen will we be carrying out the divine obligation of our nation.”³⁹ Therefore, now that Taiwan has reached a strong standard of domestic living, both the KMT and the DPP have emphasized Taiwan’s moral obligation to assist the needy abroad, and organizations like the ICDF play a key role in implementing this policy through building ties with the domestic audience.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Using the specifics of the Taiwan ICDF as a case study, I have sought to clarify and expand the reasons why governments engage in international development assistance. This article has two central arguments. First, we live in an era of empty language or claptrap, where politicians and civil servants exist behind layers of communications bureaucracy, and this is leading to severe public distrust of political rhetoric. Under such conditions, governments are well advised to use deeds rather than words if they are to further their levels of approval. International development assistance is therefore one way that this can be achieved. Second, the employment of a political communications framework to the analysis of development assistance can help to advance the debate on its international effectiveness beyond the predominant context of political economy. Thus, the political communications approach can help to identify potential audiences beyond those immediately impacted and shed further light on the purpose of the activities. Consequently, it would be prudent for all analysts to recognize that no state undertakes international development assistance on purely philanthropic grounds; if they did, the disparity between the rich and poor would stop rising at the rates that it does. Moreover, it is illogical for the neoliberal state to do this as it would involve the relinquishment of economic power to potential competitors. Instead, development assistance should be seen as part of a state’s attempt to consolidate its political, economic, and social capital.

The Taiwan ICDF has made significant changes to its international conduct in recent years. These have been in line with political movements in Taiwan that have sought to democratize and mainstream Taiwan under international consensus regarding universal values and engagement with the underdeveloped world. Nevertheless, the ICDF’s political function remains a high priority. Alongside its contemporary emphasis on capacity building among the world’s poor, the organization remains dedicated to communicating with foreign elites who look favorably on Taipei and, in recent years, it has expanded its communications operations to engage with international fora as de facto representatives of the Taiwan government. This was the result of international restrictions agreed to by Taiwan in the wake of a

diplomatic truce between the island and the Chinese mainland in 2008. Finally, the ICDF engages with Taiwan's domestic audience as a method of uniting a still somewhat polarized political entity. Organizations like the ICDF therefore have grown in political stature in recent years as direct trust in politicians has waned at home and around the world. However, development assistance organizations must ensure that they keep checks on the balance between their wider political activities and the direct impact of the work that they do at grassroots level; a loss of public confidence in the latter would lead to crises in their political integrity as well. 🌐

Notes

Colin Alexander is lecturer in communications studies at Nottingham Trent University. His research, which has focused on the political communications of marginalized nation-states and substate actors in the international arena, has taken him to Europe, East Asia, Central America, and the Caribbean. In 2013, he was awarded an academic fellowship by the Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs to research its public diplomacy.

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