Towards an Enhanced Understanding of Aid Policy Reform: Learning from the French Case

Major overhauls of aid policies and institutions are comparatively rare. When they happen, they are usually ascribed to pressures arising from outside donor agencies. Where internal forces for change are identified, the focus is on field operatives rather than political entrepreneurs based in donor head offices. This article homes in on the role of the political entrepreneur and shows how this actor can help effect top-down reforms to overseas development assistance. It does so by combining a political entrepreneurship perspective with a broader theorisation of policy change, historical institutionalism, and applying this innovative framework to French aid reforms over the years (2001-2010) when Jean-Michel Severino was Managing Director of the Agence Française de Développement. It finds that, while historical institutionalism can explain the broad direction of French changes in terms of 'structural factors' such as exogenous shocks and new institutional configurations, it struggles to account for incremental shifts and the emergence of 'new' ideas. Political entrepreneurship addresses these issues through its emphasis on individual human agents and their operational and ideational strategies. It concludes that this relatively parsimonious framework could provide an enhanced understanding of other reforms in the international development field and beyond.

KEYWORDS

aid, France, development, political entrepreneurship, Africa, historical institutionalism, public policy reform, agency structure

Radical overhauls of the foreign aid policies and institutions of bilateral donors are relatively rare. Where they occur, either over time, as with Japan's rise as a 'foreign-aid superpower' (Rix, 1996), or suddenly, as with Britain's creation of an autonomous Department for International Development (Porteous, 2008), they are generally attributed to pressures arising outside of donor agencies. Many scholars ascribe new directions in overseas development assistance (ODA) to 'structural' forces in the wider politico-economic, ideational and institutional environment. For some, the focus is on global events like the 1998 financial crisis (Dang *et al*, 2009) or new norms emanating from international organisations like the United Nations (Thiele *et al*.,

2007) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Mawdsley *et al*. 2014). For others, the emphasis is on the election of governments with different political ideologies (Banks *et al*. 2012) or changes in the 'development cooperation landscape' (Gore, 2013: 770), particularly the rise of non-OECD donors and 'beyond-aid' financing (Zimmermann and Smith, 2011).

A rather different tack is taken by development management scholars who, whilst recognising that 'domestic politics' and 'international political economy dynamics … influence donor conduct' (Gulrajani, 2015: 153), lay great stress on the modernising impulses that arise from within aid agencies (Hupe and Hill, 2007; Honig, 2014; Arel-Bundock *et al*., 2015). In effect, as Gulrujani (2015: 160) has argued, the 'silent figures' and 'street level bureaucrats' who 'populate donor bureaucracies' are 'worthy of attention for their axiomatic discretion and autonomy and their ability to shape public policy in significant ways'. This centrality of focus on human agents is welcome if not new. Drawing on Giddens (1984), Hyden and Mukandala (1999: 24) explore the influence of donor agency officials on 'the fate of their organization'. Similarly, Long (1990), Schuurman (1993) and Booth (1994) elaborate sophisticated actor-oriented approaches that demonstrate the dialectic interaction between 'agency' and 'structure'. While these writings home in on field operatives and 'extension agents' working on front-line ODA delivery, they pay much less attention to high-level government officials based in donor headquarters, who assume the characteristics of a political entrepreneur, that is, a 'special kind of actor embedded in the sociopolitical fabric who is alert to the emergence of opportunities and acts upon them' (Aflaki *et al*, 2015: 1).[1]

This article homes in on the role of the political entrepreneur and shows how this actor can help bring about important top-down aid reforms. It does so by developing an innovative model that combines two seemingly rival, but actually complementary, perspectives on public policy reform, namely political entrepreneurship (PE) – the 'purposive political action of getting hold of opportunities for political profit'(Aflaki *et al* (2015) – and historical institutionalism, which looks at how 'structure' – taken here to refer to pre-existing and reconfigured 'institutions', path dependencies, and latent ideas already within the ODA system – facilitates or constrains reforms (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992: 2; Swiss, 2018). This framework is then applied to the case of French foreign aid, which is widely assumed to have undergone, since its inception, only one set of radical changes, namely the reforms effected by French Prime Minister Lionel

Jospin in the late 1990s (Lancaster, 1999; Utley, 2002; Moncrieff, 2004). In concentrating so heavily on this single watershed moment, the ODA literature has, it will be argued here, overlooked the quiet revolution that occurred over the following decade when Jean-Michel Severino served as Managing Director of France's donor agency, the Agence Française de Développement (AFD). While there has been analysis of French ODA in the 2000s (Meimon, 2007; Cambon and Vantomme, 2011), the literature has failed to show how and why the Severino years were so transformative.

In tackling these questions, this article makes a significant contribution to aid and public policy scholarship. First, it sheds light on important changes in the development programme of a top five donor state and Africa's largest bilateral donor (OECD, 2016). Second, by homing in on the challenges facing the AFD, the world's thirteenth largest aid agency (Birdsall and Kharas, 2010: 29), this research provides insights into the pressures confronting donor organisations of a similar size (the Japanese, Spanish and Norwegian Foreign Ministries, the Australian Agency for International Development and the Canadian International Development Agency) and with comparable grant and lending functions (Germany's Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau and Japan's International Cooperation Agency).[2] Third, by adopting a conceptual framework that focuses on both 'structural' forces and the agency of high-ranking donor officials, this study capture something of the complexity of ODA reforms. Finally, it casts light on an actor, the political entrepreneur, whose influence over other aid and public policy changes is worthy of further investigation.

This article is divided into four parts. The first sets out our research parameters and framework. The second identifies persistent features of French ODA from the 1960s to the 1990s before turning to changes during Severino's stewardship of the AFD (2010-2010). Drawing upon a range of sources – the academic literature on ODA and public policy change; French government, OECD and press reports on aid; and ten interviews with AFD and French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) officials – the third section explains these shifts from a historical instituionalist (HI) perspective, while the fourth does so using an PE lens. Finally, the conclusion explores the wider significance of these findings for aid and public policy reforms.

Research Framework

Before proceeding, it is worth outlining our parameters and framework. First, the focus is on French bilateral ODA as defined by the OECD, that is, as concessional government loans and grants to developing countries with economic development as their main objective. Second, the emphasis is less on the Cooperation, Finance and Foreign Ministries that were central to the French ODA apparatus in the early post-colonial decades and more on the AFD, which took over most bilateral aid in the 2000s.

Finally, our intention is not to expose shortcomings in HI or PE approaches but rather to demonstrate that they can be combined to provide a more rounded explanation of policy change. HI is *prima facie* better suited to explaining contextual and historical pressures than it is to identifying (human) agency or ongoing processes of institutional development (Mabee, 2011: 33). It builds on March and Olsen's work (1984) on the 'new institutionalism' and forms one of three institutionalisms, the others being rational choice and sociological institutionalism (Hall and Taylor, 1996). HI is concerned with 'tracing processes through time; and analyzing institutional configurations and contexts' (Pierson and Skopcol, 2004). It pays particular attention to 'critical junctures', moments which allow latent ideas to resurface and radical changes to happen (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007). Institutions, taken here to refer primarily to 'formal rules and organizations' (Streeck and Thelen 2005), adapt to facilitate the emergence of these ideas, creating a new institutional configuration.[3] As soon as this configuration is firmly established, subsequent changes follow a self-reinforcing logic where there are increasing returns associated with continuing down this path and costs associated with going back (Pierson, 2000). The HI perspective reveals 'history's heavy hand' (Ikenberry, 1994). However, it is criticised for placing 'too much focus on stability and radical change, too little focus on change over time' (Mabee, 2011: 28). Schmidt (2006: 3) even contends that it 'cannot account for incremental change'.[4] A second criticism is that it can appear 'historically deterministic' (Ibid), overstating the role of path-dependencies and institutional configurations.[5] In this context, Kössler (2005: 288) has remarked that 'if institutions created in the past … constrain future developments … it is not immediately obvious how the same account can explain both the lasting impact of institutions over time, and … account for institutional change' (Kössler, 2005: 288). Finally, in focusing so heavily on latent ideas that were present within the system at the time of the ‘critical juncture’, HI is less adept at accounting for ‘new’ thinking that emerges subsequently and cannot be traced back causually to that seminal moment.

These criticisms are addressed by combining HI with a PE perspective. Though widely employed in public policy and management studies (Aflaki *et al.*, 2015; Wilson and Millman, 2003), PE has been largely absent from the aid literature.[6] Its value as a concept is said by Mintrom and Norman (1999: 658) to be ‘greatly increased when it is integrated with broader theorizations of the sources of policy stability and policy change’. PE, which is sometimes likened to ‘policy brokerage,’[7] is *a priori* better adapted to explaining the role of individual human agency in introducing ‘new ideas’ and effecting incremental, even potentially transformative, changes over time (Mintrom and Vergari, 1996). It also includes a focus on opportune moments for change, what Kingdon (1984) terms ‘a policy window’, Sabatier (1998) ‘an exogenous shock’, and Baumgartner and Jones (1993) a moment of ‘punctuated equilibrium’. Such a moment is similar to a ‘critical juncture’, but crucially it is up to the political entrepreneur to grasp this opportunity through force of character, strategies and his/her framing of the ideational context.

French Aid and the AFD 1961-2001

Between 1961, when the OECD began measuring ODA flows, and 2001, when Severino was appointed AFD Director-General, a number of features characterised French aid thinking, structures, operations and effectiveness. French *thinking* was marked by a lack of strategic vision and a myriad of objectives (OECD, 2003: 20). Indeed, according to Lancaster (1999: 130), ‘The French programme has never had a development doctrine to guide it. There [was] no general framework to provide a strategic focus […], no means of prioritising the activities funded in the name of development, and no basis for holding aid agencies broadly accountable’. Insofar as there was a strategy, it was reflected in the ‘Gaullist Consensus’, a longstanding Left-Right understanding which held that French ODA should be concentrated on francophone Africa as a means of bolstering French geopolitical and economic influence (Bourmaud, 2011).

As regards *organisational structures*, these were complex and neocolonial, with the Cooperation Ministry – formerly the Ministère de la France d’Outre-Mer (1946-1959) – serving as France’s main ‘development’ agency and ‘mouthpiece for the defense of African interests’ (Lundsgaarde, 2013: 127). This ministry managed 23 per cent of ODA between 1980 and 1997 (Ibid). Its focus was the *champ* (France’s privileged aid zone, mainly in Africa). Successive French presidents and their advisory Africa cells relied upon the Cooperation Ministry to fund their efforts to promote French interests in Africa. The Ministère de l’Economie, des Finances et de l’Industrie (MINEFI) was another key player: its Treasury Directorate had reponsibility for the Franc Zone (a currency support arrangement between France and fourteen African states) and structural adjustment assistance, while its Trade Directorate maximised commercial opportunities. MINEFI managed around 40 per cent of aid, more than in any other donor country (Coordination Sud, 2005: para 2.2). The MFA or Quai d’Orsay dealt with countries outside the *champ*. In 1989, it administered 9 percent of ODA (Lundsgaarde, 2013: 126). Finally, the AFD, for all its post-war history of promoting socio-economic development overseas (Pacquement, 2015), remained a ‘marginal’ player (Severino, 2004); it was a development bank, with no Ministerial status and with responsibility for around 6 per cent of French ODA (Interview with AFD, November 2016). Despite having respected managing directors like André Postel-Vinay (1944-1972), the AFD was not vocal and was inclined ‘to wait for instructions from its tutelary Ministries’, namely the MFA, MINEFI, Cooperation, Interior and DOM TOM Ministries (Ibid).

Turning to the *operational dimension*, the French aid establishment had a limited palette of ‘classic’ instruments, ranging from technical assistance (MFA/ Cooperation Ministry) and project aid (Cooperation Ministry) to structural adjustment loans and balance-of-payments support (MINEFI), through to programme assistance (Cooperation Ministry/ MINEFI). The AFD focused on loans and was only authorised to offer grants as from 1990. On the geographical front, French aid was ‘scattered’, with 44 per cent of bilateral assistance spread across 130 countries in 1997-1998 (OECD, 2000: 45). At the same time, forty to fifty per cent was typically reserved for sub-Saharan Africa (Jacquemot, 2011: 44). The Cooperation Ministry prioritised sub-Saharan Africa as did the AFD, whose remit increased from 26 zones (including 18 African and eight DOM TOMs) in 1946 to 63 zones, mainly in France’s former Empire (AFD, 2011: 217-218).

As to sectoral priorities, these were broad, reflecting the size of the aid budget (1.3 per cent of French Gross Domestic Product between 1960 and 1964: Bossuat, 2003: 440) and the number of ministries involved (over ten) (OECD, 2003: 55). France's ODA apparatus concentrated on social infrastructure, (higher) education, rural development, *cultural rayonnement* and government capacity-building. The AFD's focus was initially on the productive sector, private sector development and infrastructure projects (Pacquement, 2015). Over time, the AFD ventured into rural and socio-environmental work (AFD, 2011: 221).

Turning to *cost and development effectiveness*, this issue was regularly raised in Parliamentary reports (Jeanneney, 1964, Hessel, 1990). It became more salient in the post-Cold War period when France recognised its limited capacity to tackle Africa's growing challenges. Jospin's promise that France would 'not … do less but better' (cited in Utley, 2002) prompted the AFD to introduce 'results-based project steering' and more meritocratic procedures under Antoine Pouilleutte (AFD Managing Director, 1995-2000). Yet these measures did not put paid to longstanding criticisms of France's overall aid programme, its weak culture of evaluation (Lancaster, 1999: 132) and its fragmented, opaque management systems (Olivier and Sidibé, 2004: 58-62). If anything, they underscored the extent to which PE had hitherto been in short supply and the politico-economic context had previously been hostile, stifling earlier attempts at reform, whether by Development Minister Jean-Pierre Cot (1981-82) or Prime Minister Alain Juppé (1995-97).

Changes under Severino

So what changes occurred in France's aid thinking, organisational structures, operations and effectiveness over the Severino years? Much of the new *thinking* arose out of French Premier Jospin's letter, dated November 2001, instructing Severino to play 'a determining role in the elaboration of new and coherent development thinking' (Cited in Moncrieff, 2004: 187) and 'make French aid more effective' (cited in OCDE, 2004: 59). This new mandate coincided with the end of the Gaullist consensus and allowed the AFD to develop a more social perspective on ODA as a tool for addressing the challenges of globalisation, particularly the harmful effects of unbridled free markets, deregulation and climate change on the poorest countries (*Lettre du Continent*, 4 November 2008). It also recognised that ODA should be accompanied by other transfers and that donors should develop more partnerships with non-state actors. This vision was reflected in the AFD's first and second strategic orientation projects: POS I (2002-2006) and II (2007-2011).

As regards *organisational structures*, the most important reform predated Severino's appointment, and involved, in the late 1990s, the merging of the Cooperation Ministry into the MFA; the creation of the interministerial coordination committee overseeing international development (CICID in French), the establishment of a new Zone de Solidarité Prioritaire (ZSP) or privileged ODA zone, and the designation of the AFD as France's pivotal aid operator. These changes led to a flow of resources from the Foreign Ministry to the AFD, which had taken charge of 29 per cent by 2011 (Cambon and Vantomme, 2011: 175). Equally, they paved the way for the recruitment of 700 staff, half the total number, over the decade (AFD, 2011: 211). Crucially, agents under the age of 40, often economists, were among the recruits (OECD, 2013: 66).

This expansion was coupled with measures that facilitated a top-down reform agenda: increases in the number of managers, greater centralisaton (from 73 per cent of staff based at head office in 2001 to 81 per cent in 2010 (AFD, 2011: 211)), and changes in AFD governance. The latter included the creation in 2004 of a broad-based planning group, the Conférence d'orientation stratégique et de programmation (COSP) and, in 2009, the establishment of an AFD steering group (the Conseil d'Orientation Stratégique), which was chaired by France's Development Minister. Significantly too, the AFD came to be organised around three divisions: one for 'foreign' countries, another for the DOM TOMs and a third directorate for strategy, which brought together the AFD's evaluation, research and policy departments (AFD, 2011: 222). Furthermore, the technical services, hitherto integrated into geographic departments, were reorganised thematically (OECD, 2003: 59).

Turning to the *operational dimension*, there was an expansion of the AFD's geographical and sectoral focus as well as its range of instruments. While the AFD continued to concentrate bilateral grant assistance on sub-Saharan Africa, the share of overall AFD commitments (loans plus grants) directed towards this sub-region fell from 74 to 60 per cent between 2006 and 2010 (AFD, 2011). At the same time, the AFD increased lending to middle-income economies, which had greater capacity to repay loans. Its expansion started in 2002 in the Mediterranean and South-East Asia. It extended in 2006 to India, Brasil, Indonesia and Pakistan and then in 2009 to Mexico, Colombia, Bangladesh, Malaysia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Kazakhstan, Ouzbekistan and Mongolia (Cambon and Vantomme, 2011: 162). Agencies opened in Beijing in 2004 then Jakarta, New Delhi, Islamabad in 2007 as well as Manila in 2010 (Ibid). Between 2006 and 2009, there were meteoric rises in AFD commitments to Latin America (from 6.5 M€ to 483 M€), Asia and the Pacific (459 M€ to 911 M€) and the Mediterranean and Middle East (297.9 M€ to 983 M€) (Cour des Comptes, 2010: 51).

There was, equally, a widening of the AFD's sectoral focus as it assumed responsibility for health, education, rural development, the environment, governance, private sector development and NGOs. In addition, the agency adopted a more systematic approach to tackling Global Public Goods (GPGs), that is, goods that are not exhausted when consumed and from whose consumption no one is excluded (Smith, 2003). The AFD concentrated on fighting transmittable diseases, conserving biodiversity and combating climate change, investing 12 billion euros in the latter between 2005-14 (AFD 2013: 7).

As regards instruments, these years witnessed an explosion in loans, which rose from 14 per cent of annual bilateral commitments in 2005 to 40 per cent in 2010 (Ibid: 48). By 2011, loans accounted for 84 per cent of overall AFD Group activity,[8] compared to 34 per cent in 2004 (*Tribune*, 23 April 2010). This move towards less concessional resource flows to developing countries did not, however, signal a reluctance to engage with the increasingly important goal of global poverty reduction. Indeed, with this end in mind, the AFD introduced new aid-related instruments, which were better adapted to the needs of poor and emerging economies. These included counter-cyclical loans, which allowed indebted countries to suspend capital repayments when export earnings collapsed; ARIZ (*assurance pour le risque de financement de l'investissement privé*), an AFD scheme guaranteeing loans to the poorest through local financial institutions; and credit-lines for environmental projects (*Les Echos*, 2 March 2010).

Significantly too, the AFD reduced the percentage of its lending to states from 90 per cent in 2001 to 50 per cent in 2008 (*Figaro*, 5 October 2010). At the same time, it forged or strengthened partnerships with the Gates Foundation, which had substantial resources but needed networks on the ground (*Le Monde*, 30 March 2007); the World Bank, which offered huge co-financing potential (OECD, 2013: 76); and the Credit Agricole, which associated French savers with development projects (*Figaro*, 21 April 2010).

Finally, the Severino decade saw the AFD sharpen its focus on cost-effectiveness. Its strategic plans enabled it to track spending against objectives, demonstrate value for money and deliver results-based aid, in line with the 2005 Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness. There was also a drive to enhance the impact of development, with a 'progressive culture' of evaluation emerging in French aid circles (OECD, 2003: 63). The AFD stepped up its budget for evaluations and by 2011 was evaluating at least one in three projects (Cambon and Vantomme, 2011: 78). It moved away from internal evaluations and relied on expert consultants, while also associating recipients with evaluations and including local authorities in evaluation steering groups (OECD, 2003: 63). It introduced filmed, meta- and decentralised evaluations as well as impact assessments (Interview with AFD, December 2014).

To sum up, Severino clearly oversaw major reforms of French ODA and the AFD. It is, however, hard, in the absence of comparable long-run data on donor rankings, to 'measure' the impact of these changes. It can nonetheless be observed that by the end of Severino's mandate, the AFD ranked ahead of the other main actors in the French administration, the MFA and MINEFI, on key indicators of aid quality ('maximising efficiency', 'fostering institutions' and 'reducing burdens' (Birdsall and Kharas, 2010).[9] Equally, French ODA – albeit for reasons that went beyond Severino's reforms and included higher levels of French government commitment to UN poverty reduction targets and OECD as well as EU norms on aid practice and coordination (OECD, 2008; OECD, 2013; European Commission, 2006) – was no longer being singled out for criticism in terms of effectiveness or 'fragmentation' (that is, donor proliferation and aid dispersal).[10] Instead, it came be respectably, if never highly, ranked in donor league tables: 25th out of 38 for its selectivity, alignment, harmonisation and specialisation (Knack *et al.*, 2011); and 26th out of 39 for its transparency, specialisation, selectivity and overhead costs (Easterly and Williamson, 2011).

A Historical Institutionalist Perspective

Having highlighted key changes over the Severino years, how we can explain these using our conceptual framework. To begin with our HI account, this emphasises the importance of a critical juncture, which is represented here by the Jospin reforms of 1998 and 1999. These marked the culmination of a long-runnning battle of ideas between *les anciens* or conservative 'old guard' supporting the Gaullist Consensus and *les modernes*, modernisers favouring a normalisation of aid relations with Africa (Gounin, 2009). The reforms symbolised a watershed moment when the Cooperation Ministry was transformed into a division of the MFA (the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development or DGCID) and responsibility for aid began to be transferred, initially to the DGCID and then to the AFD. That these changes helped create a permissive context was confirmed by one AFD official (Interview, April 2016), who told the author: ‘The AFD and for that matter the whole of France were ripe for reform’ when Severino arrived at the AFD.

From an HI perpective, Jospin’s measures gave rise to an *institutional configuration* that facilitated, often inadvertently, many of the aid reforms of the 2000s. Thus, whilst the Jospin government had been seeking to tighten control over the AFD by placing it primarily under the dual tutelage of the Finance and Foreign Ministries, this restructuring ended up exacerbating Ministerial rivalries and allowing the AFD greater structural autonomy and freedom to act in the field (Severino, 2012). The AFD’s room for manoeuvre was further increased by the absence of counter-proposals from French government ministers (Interview with Severino, April 2016), by the CICID’s failure to meet between 2006 and 2009 (OECD, 2013: 19), and by the fact that the MFA, MINEFI and AFD all shared a role in ODA operations and strategic thinking (OECD, 2013: 60). Further leeway was afforded by the AFD’s longstanding connection with the Finance Ministry, which helped the former avoid the problems facing the DGCID: its budgetary crisis in 2002, its loss of personnel and its reliance on short-term staff (Meimon, 2005). Equally, another development that favoured the AFD was the merger in 2004 of three Finance Ministry departments (‘Direction du Trésor’, ‘Direction des Relations économiques extérieures’ (DREE) and ‘Direction de la Prévision’ into a single division (Direction Générale du Trésor (AFD, 2011: 189)). This made it easier for the AFD to operate in emerging economies that had previously been the preserve of the DREE. Finally, the AFD’s public-private, semi-autonomous status enabled it to ‘combine the role of banker, development agency, consultancy and technical assistant’ and gave it ‘considerable flexibility’ and ‘a vast range of instruments with which to respond to the challenges of developing countries’ (Cambon and Vantomme, 2011: 36 and 44).

At the same time, Jospin’s initial reforms took on, particularly as they were accompanied by the departure or retirement of so many officials from the ex-Cooperation Ministry, a *path-dependent* logic. Put simply, it would have been hard to reverse these changes and made more sense just to press on. Three examples will illustrate this point. First, the Jospin reforms had authorised the AFD to work on infrastructure spending on health and education. By 2004, it was only logical for the CICID to approve the handing over of other related issues, including social infrastructure and NGO capacity-building (Coordination Sud, 2005, para 1.4.1). Second, Jospin's measures had allowed duplication between MFA and AFD operational activities in the new aid priority zone. In 2005, the CICID, rectified this by giving the lead to the AFD in the ZSP and the MFA outside this zone (Ibid). Third, Jospin's changes had accorded the AFD a pivotal aid role without the accompanying funding. The CICID therefore authorised financial transfers from the DGCID to the AFD in 2004.

Focusing finally on *old* or *latent ideas* within the French ODA system, these are deemed to have helped legitimise reforms over the Severino years. Three such ideas are outlined below. The first is that of *France as a generous donor in Africa and beyond.* It harks back to the belief that France had a duty to disseminate its universal revolutionary message. While France focused its post-colonial development efforts on Africa, its ambitions remained universal. Indeed, successive French presidents sought to extend France's reach, with Charles de Gaulle keen to include Latin America in France's sphere of influence, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing proposing a North-South dialogue, François Mitterrand backing *tiermondisme* (with its focus on all developing countries) and Jacques Chirac including Cuba in France's priority aid zone.

Against this backdrop, the global extension of the AFD's concessional loan portfolio in the 2000s was less problematic, not least given that modernisers had long been calling on France to 'decolonise' its development programme and end France's paternalistic relations with Africa (Verschave, 1998). What was, however, harder to reconcile with the notion of French generosity was France's continuing failure to come close to meeting the UN aid target of 0.7 per cent of Gross National Product target and its much-reduced bilateral grant allocation to Africa (150 M€ in 2009; *Lettre du Continent*, 11 December 2010). These reductions flew in the face of France's claim, voiced by ex-Development Minister Charles Josselin, to be 'Africa's champion' (*Marchés Tropicaux*, 14 December 2001). Ultimately, however, these weaknesses in ODA performance were camouflaged by the fact that the AFD's was channelling to sub-Saharan Africa a greater overall flow of resources (2.5 billion euros in 2010 compared to only 500 M€ in 2001), even if much of this was barely concessional (*Tribune*, 23 April 2010). The counting of questionable expenses like the cost of hosting refugees in France also made French ODA figures look more buoyant than they really were (Coordination Sud, 2005).

The second deep-rooted idea is the notion that aid should help *harness the power of globalisation*. As Moncrieff (2004: 189) has observed, French ODA was supposed ‘to demonstrate the limits of “market fundamentalism” and to rehabilitate the role of the state’. France’s opposition to *la pensée unique,* the World Bank/ International Monetary Fund (IMF) agenda of pushing free market, small-state solutions to development challenges, was more pronounced in some parts of the French aid machinery (the Cooperation Ministry) than others (the Treasury) (MFA, 1999). Even so, this resistance made it easier for the AFD to prioritise GPGs, which tackle the negative impacts of globalisation on the economies of, and sustainable livelihoods of poor people in, developing countries.

The third concept is *value for money* or *return on investment*. This idea can be traced back to the Finance Law of 1900 when France decreed that colonies had to be largely self-financing. It was reaffirmed in the *cartiériste* movement of the 1950s which called for domestic spending to be prioritised over assistance to Africa. These concerns found an echo in the international consensus – on ODA effectiveness, results-based aid and the avoidance of donor duplication– that was forged at the OECD High Level forums in Paris (2005), Accra (2008) and Busan (2011). They also resurfaced in a more critical format in reports by France’s Cour des Comptes and in public opinion polls: 49 per cent of repondents deemed French overseas assistance ineffective in a 2010 IFOP survey (*Lettre du Continent*, 20 October 2011).

The whole idea of ‘return on investment’ is buried deep within the DNA of the AFD as a development bank working at least partly to a banking logic. It moved even more centre-stage over the Severino years, as France sought to bring its economy into line with the Maastricht convergence criteria, embarked upon a Comprehensive Spending Review (the 2001 *Loi Organique relative aux Lois de Finance* or LOLF) and later struggled during the 2008 financial crisis. This idea of ‘returns’ facilitated not only the AFD’s massive expansion of loans, at historically low interest rates, to emerging economies (OECD, 2013: 51), but also its efforts to involve the private sector more in growth-generating aid programmes (*Journal du Centre*, 19 June 2010). While such an approach would have been harder for ‘traditional’ poverty-focused donor agencies, it was broadly accepted across the French government, not least as the AFD had its own equity and was, by the mid-2000s, clearing an annual profit of around 200 M€, at least half of which was clawed back by the Treasury (Cambon and Vantomme, 2011: 34). Crucially, this strategy also brought political returns. To illustrate, AFD loans to the Chinese railway sector helped restore good relations with China in 2009 after tensions over Tibet and human rights (*Figaro Économie*, 27 April 2009).

By the time of Severino's appointment, however, the return on aid to Africa was diminishing. Africa's share of French exports declined from 8.7 per cent in 1970 to 5 per cent in 2010 (Hugon, 2010: 166-167). Furthermore, francophone Africa (Tunisia and Morocco excepted) did not have the capacity to repay loans and was dependent on concessional aid. Equally, Africa was being wooed by emerging powers and no longer offered the exclusive relationship with France that had been so fundamental to the Gaullist Consensus. On the cultural front too, there were diminishing returns, as African countries like Rwanda were adopting English as their language of instruction and as bilingual countries like Cameroon were joining the Commonwealth. The opportunity cost of investing in Africa was, moreover, rising as emerging economies, the Mediterranean and the Gulf offered ever-increasing commercial and strategic returns.

It follows that HI provides a solid foundation for understanding the change of direction in French ODA under Severino. However, it struggles to account for ongoing reforms, such as the creation of a global lending portfolio, or indeed the emergence of 'new' ideas, such as GPGs. Significantly too, HI, cannot fully explain how a junior aid agency could assert its 'structural autonomy' and out-manoeuvre more powerful tutelary ministries or indeed how and at whose instigation, a risk-averse institution, the AFD, could undergo such a sudden expansion in its activities.

A Political Entrepreneurship Account

A PE perspective is well suited to addressing these apparent 'blindspots'. In line with our HI analysis, it identifies Jospin's aid reforms of 1998 and 1999 as the 'window of opportunity' for policy change. However, rather than assuming that subsequent developments were simply path-dependent, it shows how Severino capitalised upon this opportunity and used it to increase his own decision-making discretion ('managerial autonomy') and the AFD's 'independence' from other government structures ('structural autonomy').[11] It pays particular attention to the way that Severino: i) drew upon his qualities as a political entrepreneur; (ii) deployed strategies such as team-building, defusing opposition and bureaucratic manoeuvring; and (iii) shaped the ideational environment.

Entrepreneurial Qualities

To begin with entrepreneurial qualities, a contrast is usually drawn between assigned entrepreneurs (who use their seniority to push for change) and emergent entrepreneurs (who effect reform through force of character) (Aflaki *et al*, 2015: 7). This distinction is less pertinent in Severino's case, as he combined elements of both. He was of course the appointed head of the AFD, with all the formal qualifications and experience required for such a post: second in his class at the prestigious *Ecole Nationale d'Administration*; an *inspecteur des finances* at the Finance Ministry in 1984; a technical adviser in the cabinet of Cooperation Minister, Jacques Pelletier; Development Director in the Cooperation Ministry in 1993; Central European Director in the World Bank in 1996 then the Bank's Vice-President for Asia in 1997. While this career trajectory gave Severino both a firm footing in the French administration and a more international outlook than previous AFD Directors, it did not, in itself, provide the necessary impetus for his reforms. For this, he also needed the personal qualities of an emergent entrepreneur: charisma, determination, a flexible intellect, a readiness to take political risks, a clear vision and the ability to convince others of its merits (Interviews with MFA, November 2017; and AFD, April 2016 and July 2018). Severino was also helped by the fact that, unlike most *énarques*, he had 'a very strong commitment to development' and was not 'your standard *inspecteur des finances* who is interested in being placed powerful positions' (Interview with AFD, April 2016). It was, no doubt, this blend of expertise and personal traits that provided Severino with the springboard for greater 'managerial autonomy', helping him secure three mandates, and even allowing him to survive under a centre-Right president, Jacques Chirac, despite his own Left-leaning tendencies. Equally, they enabled him to see off seven French Development Ministers and several putative rivals for the top AFD post (*Lettre du Continent*, 5 April 2007). In turn, these extensions to his tenure gave him time to fulfil his mandate, effect meaningful change and raise the AFD's profile domestically and internationally.

Strategies

While the qualities of entrepreneurs are sometimes assumed to determine their success or failure (Young, 1991; Byman and Pollack, 2001), there are inevitably problems 'with reducing [policy] change to … an entrepreneur's attributes' (Goddard, 2009: 256). It is, as such, important to turn to Severino's strategies, the first two of which were primarily aimed at enhancing his managerial autonomy.

The first strategy involved team-building across the French aid establishment. Within the AFD, he constructed, during his first year in office, his own seven-strong executive committee (or 'Board'), which included a 'mix of insiders and outsiders' (Interview with AFD, July 2018). He also liaised regularly with a close-knit group colleagues – including his Head of Strategy Pierre Jacquet, Chief of Operations Serge Michaïlof and 'special adviser' Olivier la Fourcade – who served as a 'sounding board' for innovative ideas (Interview with AFD, June 2018). Elsewhere within the French system, he won support from French ambassadors in countries where the AFD was present (Interview with AFD, April 2016). He also built alliances across the political establishment, including with senior officials in the President's and Prime Minister's offices (Ibid), all the while enjoying, as an ex-Inspector of Finances, an affinity with Finance Ministry officials. Significantly too, as an ex-World Bank employee, Severino had strong international networks of contacts which included links with influential figures like Dominique Strauss Kahn (ex-IMF Director), Pascal Lamy (World Trade Organisation director 2005-2013) and Kemal Dervis (UN Development Programme administrator 2005-09). This networking platform provided much-respected repositories of skills and knowledge that Severino drew upon to support his initiatives (Burt, 2000).[12]

A second strategy involved defusing or marginalising opposition. Within the AFD, dissent was, above all, voiced by the *développeurs* (*Les Echos*, 21 January 2007) – development practitioners who had served in the old Cooperation Ministry and/or been on postings to Africa – who objected to the agency's increased exposure to risk, its emphasis on profit-making loans to emerging economies, and its downgrading of

France's Africa mission. One AFD official observed: 'Development should really prioritise Africa or developing countries in South Asia or even South America but not China and Turkey'. It should not select 'bankable people over the poorest'. He even questioned (Interview, July 2013) whether the focus on the GPGs, which formed the basis of the justification for concessional lending to emerging countries, was genuine since 'many projects were only remotely related to the fight against climate change'.

To attenuate this criticism and avert a 'managerial crisis' (*Les Echos*, 22 January 2007), Severino engaged in a multi-pronged strategy. First, he toured every AFD department to outline his own (evidence-based) thinking, consult on his reforms and underscore the drawbacks of maintaining a low-key approach to development at a time when loans to the AFD's traditional African 'clients' were no longer being repaid or renewed (Interview with AFD, April 2016). Second, he employed consultants, replaced senior management (Ibid), and 'changed staff, reinvigorated or replaced 'old hands' with a Marxist vision by young entrepreneurs' (Interview with AFD, July 2013). As he took over, he also benefited fortuitously from several retirements within the AFD plus secondments of AFD staff to other Ministries (Ibid). Third, he constructed a narrative which stressed that Africa, rather than being abandoned since 2001, had benefited from six times more resources from the AFD Group by 2010 (*Figaro*, 21 April 2010). Finally, he criticised the government for aid cutbacks to Africa (from 350 M€ to 150 M€ between 2008 and 2009) and spending on other priorities, notably in Afghanistan (*Lettre du Continent*, 11 December 2008).

Other opposition came from the MFA, particularly Development Ministers, who resented the transfer of credits and responsibilities to the AFD. Brigitte Girardin (2005-2007) sought unsuccessfully to ensure that the AFD be subject to 'a new form of co-steering with a president from the Treasury and a Managing Director from the Quai' (*Lettre du Continent*, 5 April 2007). Subsequently, Alain Joyandet (2008-2010), sought to stamp his authority on the AFD by chairing the newly created Comité d'Orientation Stratégique, which oversaw AFD activities (*Lettre du Continent*, 22 May 2008). In response, Severino drew upon his contacts within the Treasury, made speeches that 'made him sound ministerial', and pointed to the AFD's revenue-generating activities under his leadership (Interview with AFD, July 2013).

Turning finally to bureaucratic strategies, these were designed to increase the AFD's structural autonomy. They built upon Severino's knowledge of the aid system following his time in the Treasury and Cooperation

Ministry. His experience at the Bank had introduced him to the idea of New Public Management (NPM), which was underdeveloped at that time in France (Interview with AFD, April 2016). Upon his appointment, Severino was therefore immediately able to introduce NPM and develop a strategic plan, together with indicators, for measuring the results of French ODA (Ibid). Severino realised that, in the context of France's 2001 Comprehensive Spending Review (the *Loi Organique relative aux Lois de Finance or LOLF*), the AFD was 'in a race with the DGCID', that is the MFA's aid division, to convince the Treasury that it could better account for the end-uses of ODA expenditure (Interview with AFD, November 2016). Other examples of adroit manoeuvring include Severino's threat to resign if French Ambassadors were granted authority over local AFD mission directors (*Lettre du Continent*, 28 September 2006), his creation of a strategy department to generate ideas for development and his readiness to stretch bureaucratic rules: the AFD was found in a 2009 audit to be present in 17 countries, where operations had not been authorised by CICID (Cambon and Vantome, 2011: 88).

Shaping the Ideational Context

Finally, Severino shaped the ideational environment within the AFD and more broadly. He expanded the AFD's strategy division, doubling its research budget between 2007 and 2012, and effecting a step-change in its publication strategy. Indeed, by 2011, the AFD had six scientific collections, two reviews, two collections, a series with the World Bank (AFD 2011: 211), a blog (http://ideas4development.org) with high-level contributors, plus the journal *Afrique Contemporaine* (*Les Echos*, 22 January 2007). According to Moncrieff (2004: 94), Severino 'positioned the AFD as a conduit for bringing in and adapting external ideas, encouraging reflection on concepts such as "governance" and SWAPs [Sector Wide Approaches] and welcoming PRSPs [Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers], all of which have often been considered too "Anglo-Saxon" by some, especially in the DGCID'.

Significantly too, Severino influenced wider thinking on development. He did so through his communications, publications and engagement in debates about aid. His communication strategy involved interviews with, and presentations to, the media and think-tanks. The fact that there were so many talks (the

AFD (2010) compiled two volumes) and that the subject matter was so complex helped Severino to act as a 'thought leader', framing discussions about aid and the AFD during his time in office. As well as promoting managerial and structural autonomy, his publication strategy was more profound, questioning 'old' and introducing innovative ideas. One such 'new' idea was GPGs, which is 'rooted in liberal ideas of international cooperation and rights that have little historical currency in France' (Moncrieff, 2004: 205). This was the concept that Severino, keen to find a rationale for operating beyond Africa, did most to advance. Thus, building on Kaul *et al* (1999), he introduced this concept as a 'new field of economic reflection' (Severino, 2001: 19), recommended that ODA be linked more closely to such goods (Severino and Bianco, 2001) and called for a new measure of development resource flows that included GPGS (Severino and Ray, 2009).

Finally, Severino engaged in international debates on ODA. He was well placed to do so, having contributed, during his time at the French Cooperation Ministry (1993-1996), to discussions on the OECD's 1996 report, *Shaping the 21st Century* – which, in turn, helped frame the UN Millennium Development Goals (Interview with AFD, April 2016). As AFD Director, Severino influenced the debate on aid effectiveness ahead of the OECD's 2011 High-Level Meeting in Busan. According to one AFD official (Interview, April 2016), he held regular meetings with Brian Atwood and Richard Carey at the OECD and argued that 'the world of development was not a simple top-down system but a complex system [with] … multitude of donors [and] … and centres of power. Current thinking on aid effectiveness was too simplistic'. While he was not alone in expressing this concern, he set himself apart by identifying the challenge as one of 'hypercollective action' (donor proliferation and aid fragmentation) and by making concrete recommendations to improve donor coordination (Severino and Ray, 2010).

Overall, our PE perspective provides a useful supplement to our HI account. It pinpoints the actor militating for reform and shows how he was not constrained to work within a given context but actually shaped that context. On its own, however, PE overstates the role of agency and the 'newness' of ideas. By implication, it assumes that any lack of change is down to a failure of entrepreneurship and/ or the narrowness of the policy window. It does not pay enough attention to institutional and ideational barriers to change, some of which are outside the control of political entrepreneurs: the fragmented nature of the French

ODA bureaucracy, the multi-level nature of decision-making (commitments to the European Development Fund drastically reduce bilateral assistance), as well as the dominant position enjoyed by the French president on Africa policy. In the end, Severino's influence was always limited by his restricted access to President Chirac and poor relations with President Nicolas Sarkozy, who did not appreciate Severino's intellectualism, Left-leaning credentials or readiness to criticise cutbacks (Interview with AFD, December 2014).

Conclusion

While external factors often drive ODA reforms, pressures from within development bureaucracies can also be significant. The 'agency' of aid officials has long been recognised in the development literature (Long, 1990) but the focus has generally been on field operatives (Honig, 2014). Less consideration has been given to high-ranking head office officials who engage in top-down reforms. This article focuses on one such political entrepreneur, Severino, and the changes that took place, during his tenure, to the AFD's thinking, institutions, operations and policies. To explain these reforms, this study uses a framework that combines HI and PE accounts. Historical institutionalism provides a solid explanation of the new direction in French ODA policy, focusing on 'structure', specifically the 'institutional configuration' that emerged under the Jospin government, the path-dependent reforms that followed and the latent ideas legitimising later reforms. This HI analyis is, however, less adept at accounting for incremental changes, the emergence of 'new' ideas and the role of individual human agency. To capture these points, a PE approach is needed. This homes in on the way that Severino instigated reforms through force of character and strategies that furthered his own autonomy and that of the AFD.

These findings beg questions about the sustainability of France's ODA reforms and the value of our conceptual framework. There were clearly limits to the sustainability of France's aid modernisation process, not least since it was achieved through strategies that entailed risks for the AFD and upset powerful forces within the political establishment. Thus, while Severino's emphasis on NPM has become firmly embedded in France's results-based approach to aid and he has continued to shape development thinking – contributing to *Un Partenariat pour l'avenir*, a Finance Ministry report (Fortes *et al.*, 2013) on future franco-African relations and joining the UN's High-Level Group on the Sustainable Development Goals) – his influence over French development policy waned as from 2009, when he was forced to sign the AFD's first 'Contract of Objectives and Means with the State'. Soon after, Severino failed to secure his preferred successor as head of the AFD; his return to the Finance Ministry was allegedly blocked by Sarkozy (Interview with AFD, July 2013); and the AFD returned to a more cautious approach with the establishment of a risk division, with around 100 staff (OECD, 2013: 65). Significantly too, some of Severino's changes were undone by his successors, Dov Zerah and Anne Paugum, who were more receptive to the demands of the AFD's tutelary ministers (*Figaro*, 5.10.10). The current Director-General Rémy Rioux also began his mandate with a proposal (subsequently dropped) to bolster the AFD's balance sheet through a merger with the resource-rich Caisse des Dépots et Consignations.

Turning to the utility of our framework, our analysis has shown that, while HI and PE perspectives have different focal points, they also have common and complementary features. To illustrate, they both focus on exogenous shocks and key moments of change. Equally, HI concentrates on the impact of institutional configurations yet these configurations are also shaped by agents. Furthermore, PE homes in on the ways that agents impact on ideational contexts and institutional set-ups yet agents are themselves socialised by their own environments. When combined, these two perspectives form a synergetic model, which, despite being less elaborate than earlier approaches to agency and structure (Giddens, 1984; Long, 1990), could nonetheless offer a nuanced understanding of how some political contexts (e.g., centralised, hierarchical forms of government) are more propitious to reform than others (e.g., consultative systems where different epistemic communities are consulted) (Mitchell, 2005: 225). It could equally shed light on the importance of timing and coincidence: would, for example, Severino have managed to enact his reforms ten years earlier or a decade later?

There are inevitably limitations associated with this model. How would we explain institutional development when there is no obvious individual political entrepreneur or team of entrepreneurs? How should we disentangle the impact of an individual political entrepreneur from the wider efforts by aid agencies to assert their 'autonomy' (Gulrajani, 2017)? How should we differentiate critical junctures from less revolutionary moments? How much relative weight should we attach to rationalist versus non-rationalist explanations? These quibbles aside, our framework does capture something of the complexity of policy reform and recognises that changes may be driven by contradictory forces including ‘old’ as well as ‘new’ ideas, path-dependent logics as well as innovative strategies, and institutional configurations that can both promote and stifle change.

This model could, as such, shed light on other public policy changes, particularly those linked to pre-existing ideas and charismatic or forceful entrepreneurs. It could, for example, be used to compare the nature and influence of political entrepreneurs over different time periods and across different institutional configurations in the same or different countries. It could also be deployed, in an aid context, to show how ‘old ideas’, such as the tying of ODA to donor commercial interests, have worked against structural autonomy and ensured the integration of development agencies into foreign and trade ministries in New Zealand (2009), Canada (2013) and Australia (2013). Equally, it could be employed to yield insights into the impact of reformist figures, such as former World Bank Director James Wolfensohn (on the introduction of poverty-focused aid), former UK Chancellor Gordon Brown (on the cancellation of African debt), and ex-French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius (on the outcome of the COP 21 negotiations).

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[1] Honig (2018) does explore top-down management pressures but stresses the limitations these impose on field agents in unpredictable environments.

[2] In 2010, these agencies spent 3,082M$, 3,066M$, 2,477M$, 2,633M$ and 2,409 M$ respectively, while the AFD committed 2,712 M$ (Birdsall &Kharas, 2010, 29).

[3] Other scholars stress 'informal rules and and organisations' (Marcussen 2000).

[4] Mahoney and Thelen (2010) link gradual endogenous policy shifts to the change-permitting properties of institutions.

[5] The critical juncture is a time-limited period when the usual constraints are eased (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007), allowing 'historic agents to alter the trajectory of development' (Katznelson 2003).

[6] See, however, Honig and Gulrajani (2018) on 'policy entrepreneurs' and Faustino and Booth (2014) on 'development entrepreneurs'. A forthcoming issue of *Public Administration and Development* will also address 'policy entrepreneurs'.

[7] Goddard (2009) views brokers as particularly effective entrepreneurs, while Christopoulos and Ingold (2015) see them as less opportunistic than than entrepreneurs.

[8] The Group includes Proparco (2016), the private sector investment arm with a 5.4 billion US dollar balance sheet.

[9] The AFD fares less well on 'transparency'. However, this 'dimension' was 'the least well captured by the indicators' (Birdsall and Kharas, 2010, 9).

[10] The European Consensus on Development of 2006 set out a common vision for a more effective, coherent and coordinated approach to development by EU institutions and member states. Birdsall and Kharas (2010) ranked France 27th out of 32 donors for fragmentation.

[11] Gulrajani (2017), drawing on Verhoest *et al* (2004), also identifies legal, policy, interventional and financial autonomy.

[12] Note, however, that social network theorists contend that actors do 'not inherently possess entrepreneurial agency' but derive it, among other things, from their position within network structures (Goddard, 2009: 258).