**Accepting aid**

BY T H E M R IS E K H A N | 7/22/2019

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| PAKISTAN continues to be dependent on international financial institutions, through the provision of billions of dollars of loans for physical infrastructure and debt servicing. But it has also been a long-time recipient of overseas development assistance or ODA, the much younger sibling of the country bailout plan.This assistance has primarily targeted social services in Pakistan including but not limited to, health, education, women`s empowerment, micro-credit, access to justice, democratic reform and rural development.While Pakistan has been and still remains in dire need to improve its commitments and performance in these and other similar sectors, it is important to ask, can we do this without the financial assistance of international donors? And secondly, should we do this without them? The obvious answer should be, yes. But the reality is that the lack of institutional human resource capacity, an outdated bureaucracy, financial mismanagement, and massive debt, continue to deprive these sectors of their due share. ODA brings some relief by providing much-needed infusions of cash and technical expertise. Much of this is also grant funding which Pakistan does not need to pay back.According to the OECD, ODA to Pakistan has seen a consistentincrease over the last 20 years from $900 million in 1997 to $2.283 billion in 2017. The US is the largest contributor of total ODA to Pakistan.But despite decades of investment by international donors to improve Pakistan`s socialinfrastructure, the dial hasn`t shifted very far. Pakistan`s Human Development Ranking for 2018 lists us 150th out of 189 countries. In 2017, Pakistan ranked 133 out of 189 in the Global Gender Inequality Index. We stand at 117 out of 189 on the Global Corruption Index (GCI), down one further from 2016.So why do donors continue to invest in Pakistan? Likewise, why does Pakistan continue to accept such aid whenever it is of fered, knowing (or possibly unknowingly) that its impact is minimal? There is obviously a geopolitical angle to this, given Pakistan`s strategic placement in South Asia, our history in armed conflict and militancy. Both Pakistan and donor countries have a global stake to claim.But the willingness of Pakistan to accept ODA and not question its success, also gives international donors leverage, as they consistently point towards the frustrations of having to work within the confines of a corrupt and non-responsive system which does not produce results. And rightly so. Several projects are invested in, technical support and advice provided and then simply forgot-ten by our governments.But there is also a frustration on our part towards donors, through their insistence on developing programmes according to their priorities which are set not necessarily on a country-by-country basis but where the donor countries themselves feel the need to intervene. And our own lack of leverage and inadequate capacity does not allow us to debate this to the contrary.These complex relationships show that unfortunately, if current trends of apathy and corruption in state mechanisms continue, we will continue to seek ODA.The second question then is, should Pakistan and countries like it, do without external help? In an ideal scenario, absolutely. But how is this possible? It is possible if we learn how to drive both the discussion and the agenda of international aid assistance in our own countries.And this we can only do if we periodically step back from such assistance and analyse our failures and successes where they may be. This does not mean depending on donor-funded evaluations of their own programming, but independent nonpartisan evaluations initiated by the government of bilateral and multilateral ODA received.Though not without its own concerns, ideally, this should be the responsibility of agencies like the Planning Commission or the Economic Affairs Division which allows international agencies to operate in Pakistan. And we should leverage the expertise of human resources available within our own civil society, academia and even our overseas diaspora for this. We do not need foreign consultants to come and identify our priorities for us. Exchange of information is one thing, but having plans and priorities, even policies written for us by outsiders, is totally another.We do not need an international donor to fund us to realise that issues such as judicial reform, women`s rights, universal education for boys and girls or corruption, are imperative for a society to flourish. And while ODA has its benefits of international collaboration and exchange of vital knowledge, we must learn how to control and guide the narrative ourselves.It may take a long while in the making, but we must start now.  The writer is an independent researcher; social policy analyst and lecturer in international development, and global migration. |  |