

POLS*3320: The Politics of Aid and Development: Governing Aid in the Age of Disruption

Course Syllabus
Department of Political Science
University of Guelph

Fall 2026
Professor Craig Johnson

Classes: Tuesday and Thursday, 2:30-3:50, MACN 118
Office: MacKinnon 5th Floor
Email: cjohns06@uoguelph.ca
Office hours: By appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

POLS*3320 explores the politics, history, and ethics of foreign aid and international development in a context of global uncertainty and shifting geopolitical priorities. Students will explore how foreign aid is shaped not only by humanitarian objectives but also by strategic, economic, and ideological interests. The course delves into the complexities of aid allocation and its consequences in the context of pressing global challenges, including budget cuts, great power politics, civil unrest, food insecurity, and climate change.

Topics include:

- The history and motivations of foreign aid
- Aid conditionality and effectiveness
- Emergency aid in contexts of civil unrest and humanitarian crises
- The impact of climate change on development priorities
- Food insecurity and food aid
- The politics of aid withdrawal and budget reallocation
- Great power politics in the context of foreign aid

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this 12-week course, students will gain a critical understanding of the ways in which foreign aid programs have been used to serve different political interests and policy agendas over time. They will use theories of geopolitics, political economy, and public policy to understand the motivations, modalities, and impacts of foreign aid policies and programs. They will also engage with academic literature, policy documents, and real-world scenarios to understand the contested role of aid in international politics and its implications for global stability and equity.

ORGANIZATION

The course is divided into five parts. **Part One** introduces the international aid regime, identifying the major forms of bilateral and multilateral assistance that have been used to organize Western

aid giving since the end of the Second World War. **Part Two** explores the geopolitics of aid, including China's (real and perceived) threat to Western (and mainly American) power, the geopolitics of multilateral governance, the geopolitics of bilateral assistance, and the geopolitics of international food aid. **Part Three** considers the political economy of aid, investigating the ways in which national and transnational economic interests have shaped the political economy of Western food aid, Canada's support for international mining, and China's "belt and road" initiative. **Part Four** explores the "hubris" of aid, a term that I use to describe the ambitious efforts of donors and aid agencies to control development projects and outcomes using randomized control trials (RCTs), carbon offsets, and family planning campaigns. Finally, **Part Five** concludes the course by reflecting upon the ways in which our class readings, lectures, and discussions influence our thinking about the perceived utility of foreign aid.