***RESEARCH PAPERS FROM CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS***

# ARE THE ACTIVITIES OF AID DONORS IN AFRICA NEO-COLONIAL IN CHARACTER?

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## Abstract

This essay critically analyses the claim that the activities of aid donors in Africa should be understood as neo-colonial. This assertion implies that aid and the activities of donors are not provided for the benefit or development of African states, but to retain structures of dominance that are ultimately to the benefit of donor states/institutions. While discussing the differing perspectives on sovereignty, this essay adopts a constructivist approach in explaining that aid, both from the global North and South that compromises the ability of a state to make its policy decisions and control its developmental narrative can create neo-colonial structures. By using Ethiopia and Zambia as case studies, this essay asserts that aid relationships are by themselves not neo-colonial. However, relational issues like historical, political, geographical and social factors, play an important role in determining the extent of a state’s agency in aid negotiations and whether such relationships become neo-colonial.

*Keywords: Neo-colonial, Nigeria, international aid, Africa, political economy*

## Introduction

The decolonisation of Africa led to the emergence of politically independent but poor states with weak institutions and fragile economies (Moyo, 2010:32). Following the successful implementation of the Marshall Plan between 1948 and 1952, which facilitated the reconstruction of European countries after the Second World War, aid was considered an effective way to raise African countries out of poverty, boost their economies and contribute to the development of the continent (Moyo, 2010:36-37). Shortly after the independence of most African states, there was an outpouring of aid from former colonial powers, on the basis of ongoing responsibility for their former colonies or to sustain relationships in order to “safeguard their access to raw materials” (Fraser, 2009:47). Although “African states had become politically sovereign and

formally equal in the nation-state system, [they] were unable to guarantee even their own administrative existence without support” (ibid). For countries like the United States, their eagerness to provide aid to African countries was borne out of their desire to suppress the influence of the Soviet Union and the spread of communism in Africa, thus “altruistic largesse” was far from the intended aim (Lagan, 2018:61). Overtime, the provision of aid by western donors has hinged on conditionalities and Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) intended to create liberalised economies, foster democratisation and/or create policy settings, which accommodate their interests (Whitfield & Fraser, 2009).

The proliferation of donors and their permeation in almost all sectors within African countries is viewed with suspicion by scholars, actors and inhabitants of the continent. For critics, the so-called developmental aim of aid is averse to the systematic underdevelopment and vicious cycle of dysfunction that prevails in most countries in the continent (Moyo, 2010). This essay critically analyses the claim that the activities of aid donors in Africa should be understood as neo-colonial in character. This claim implies that donor activities/initiatives are ultimately to the benefit of donor countries, who exert external dominance over sovereign countries “to such a degree that they [are] not genuinely self-governing” (Langan, 2017:4). Langan, citing Nkrumah, defined neo-colonialism “as the continuation of external control over African territories by newer and more subtle methods than that exercised under the formal empire” (ibid). This essay refers to aid in the form of budgetary support, project aid and blending aid initiatives, provided by states, regional bodies and International Financial Institutions (IFI) like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In light of this definition, I will discuss the notion of sovereignty by exploring whether the activities of aid donors have the capacity to delimit the powers of sovereign African nations. By adopting a constructivist

approach, I will analyse the meaning of sovereignty and how its understanding impacts upon whether the relationship between a donor state and a recipient state can be considered neo-colonial. This builds on Brown’s point which expresses that the existence of aid relationships relies on the sovereignty of African states, who have the authority to acquiesce to the presence of donors and negotiate favourable terms (Brown, 2013). However, unlike Brown’s position that sovereignty as a right to rule is unaffected by aid, I will argue that the right to rule and the autonomy of states over their policies are not entirely mutually distinct. This essay will also examine some categories of aid and whether its application has interfered with sovereignty.

To provide a more practical analysis, two case studies will be considered: Ethiopia and Zambia. These case studies provide important examples of how a country’s history, political leadership, ideology, and relationship with other states, play a role in determining the degree of control of their policy space and consequently in determining the type of relationship that exists between a donor and a recipient state. More so, the blossoming south-south partnership between China and the case studies will be examined to determine whether such relationships are also neo-colonial in character or reveal a renewed sense of African agency. I will conclude that donor aid by external powers (both from the North and the South) can be neo-colonial in character, depending on the degree of autonomy that exists in negotiations and in the policy space. However, it ultimately depends on African states to determine if relationships with aid donors become neo-colonial.

## A Different Approach to Sovereignty

Sovereignty is generally understood as encompassing states’ authority over a territory and their control of institution, laws and policies therein, it is also frequently assumed to be a “fixed and exogenous attribute of state” (Lake, 2003:305). There has been increasing controversy regarding the meaning of sovereignty and the importance of distinguishing the types of action that take away the reins of power and control from sovereign states and those that merely dictate policies for said states. Brown, quoting Whitfield and Fraser, explains that sovereignty is a “realm of political action free from foreign influence” (Brown 2013: 266,267). Other commentators like Krasner allude to sovereignty

through the Westphalian model, which emphasizes territorial control (Krasner, 1999). Therefore, a point is made to distinguish between sovereignty in its fixed sense (legal independence) and sovereignty as it relates to a state’s ability to make decisions for itself. It is useful to consider the constructivist approach to sovereignty in order to understand its nuances and how it is not necessarily of a fixed or absolute character but an evolving notion that changes depending on circumstances and the actors involved. Wangwe, explains that “sovereignty is a product of interactions with social agents…which would vary from state to state and over different historical periods” (Wangwe, 2004:385). He further posits that sovereignty is not an “absolute or elemental feature, but of a relational character which has to be specified in terms of particular rights and obligations states claim in respect of other actors” (ibid). Lake, in his analysis of the constructivist notion of sovereignty noted that although sovereignty is still seen as an absolute condition, the practice of a state, its conditions and its relations play an important role in understanding the concept of sovereignty (Lake 2003, 305). This approach goes beyond the legal or territorial understanding of what sovereignty is, but places focus on how historical, political and social structures have the capacity of shaping the relationship between donors and recipient states.

Indeed, for states to become players at the international scene, they at various points, compromise their autonomy by acceding to international instruments, such as human rights treatise; or voluntarily enter international loan agreements that give the lenders far-reaching powers in the domestic operation of states (Krasner, 1999:). Wangwe explains that most states do not operate with complete autonomy regarding their actions and policy decisions but operate with a degree of constraint. He states that “the developing world have been particularly subject to deliberate attempts to restrict their policy choice” (Wangwe, 2004: 385). For African states with a history of colonial subjugation, the relationship between the external and internal is even more delicate – where aid is laced with conditions and adjustments, it constitutes a “loss of voice” and goes to the core of the identity of such states (ibid: 384).

Brown, while conceding that the autonomy of a recipient state is invariably compromised in aid relationships, emphasizes that a distinction between

authority and control is necessary (Brown, 2013:267). He explains that the former stems from the right to rule, anchored by the politico-legal independence of a state, is hardly compromised in the aid relationship. State control on the other hand is more fluid and penetrable. Although a useful distinction, I argue that authority or politico-legal independence and control are not necessarily mutually exclusive concepts. For instance, the issue of securitization arguably falls within the ambit of a state’s authority. However, the provision of development assistance informing policies, which have led to increased securitization to “regulate the lives and activities of the developing world” (Fisher and Anderson, 2015:133) and to avoid the “spill over” of security threats, poverty and underdevelopment to western states (Abrahamsen, 2005:61) - can be considered an intrusion into a critical policy space that possibly delimits the sovereignty of a state. The numerous and complex perspectives on sovereignty makes it challenging to come to an overarching conclusion on whether a donor’s relationship with a recipient state strips the recipient of their authority and/or control. Hence, the importance of examining each relationship on its own merit.

## Sovereignty Compromised by Aid?

Langan, 2018, in his work on *Neo-Colonialism and Donor Intervention* presents three categories of aid: project aid, budget support and aid blending. Project aid and aid blending are considered types of aid where the donor state, IFIs or Development Financial Institution (DFI) directly provide monies for specific initiatives or where donor aid, public aid and DFI capital is mixed within a particular project (Langan, 2018:76). However, these types of aid have been criticised for their role in regressing growth in Africa and creating a system where poor labour standards are rife, no job security, increased poverty and underdevelopment (ibid). Through the lens of neo-colonialism expounded by Nkrumah, Langan explains that one of the reasons there has not been real development in Africa, regardless of the many years of aid dependence is because aid is used by western donors as a form of “revolving credit – whereby western governments recoup their investment through the bringing about of policy change in African countries conducive to their own economic and commercial interests” (ibid 63).

This position holds some credence, especially when past aid architecture is examined. Between the 1980s-1990s, aid provisions were hinged on

conditional lending processes that created SAPs in African states (Fraser, 2009:57). In most African countries, SAPs led to undue social hardship and made vital sectors redundant, leading to a rise in unemployment and increased poverty (Langan, 2015:203). For example, SAPs in Mozambique’s cashew sector led to the collapse of the industry while in Kenya, relaxation of import control under SAPs led to an influx of substandard goods which led to job losses of approximately 70,000 people (ibid). With the decline of SAPs and conditionalities since the 1980s, donors have asserted that the respect for country ownership “will ensure that they are not pressurized to undertaking premature trade openings and economic liberalization” (ibid:104) hence, the adoption of aid forms like budget support which was intended to enable African states to fund social programmes through homegrown policies. Scholars like Langan (2015, 2018), Nilson (2004) and Alvarez (2010) express skepticism about the so-called country ownership of budget support, explaining that the “creeping conditionality” still persists. Ideally, this type of aid gives states the leverage to decide the policies they prefer. However, there have been instances where donors and IFI’s have directly or indirectly threatened to withdraw budgetary support where the recipient state tows a policy direction that is not agreeable to the donor. The bullying and strong-arming of the Ghanaian government under the leadership of Kufuor, into discarding a policy on the increased tariffs on poultry import that the IMF was not keen on, serves as an example (Langan, 2018:72). One of the principles in the Paris Declaration on the Effectiveness of Aid speaks to the ownership of aid by recipient states and how they exercise “effective leadership over their development strategies” (OECD 2005). The declaration was a recognition of the role of recipient states in deciding and controlling their policy strategy with donors respecting states’ decisions and assisting in strengthening capacity, where needed. This is however a far cry from reality, where donors have prioritised the furtherance of their own developmental agenda and interest, thereby dictating policies in recipient states.

If we think of sovereignty, not as a “fixed and exogenous” concept but as a relational feature that evolves depending on state practice and engagement, the activities of donors, as explained in the context of budgetary support, may be deemed neo-colonial. Arguably, when donor

action dictates, hampers or compromises the ability of a recipient state to control its policy space, especially when such intrusion does not accrue benefits to the recipient state, such donor relationship can be considered far-reaching and a co-opting of the sovereignty of the recipient state. Recalling Brown’s distinction between authority and control, it is difficult to divorce the two concepts in light of the ripple impact that some donor policies/decisions have on the economy and livelihood of a recipient state.

## Sino-African Relations: Neo-Colonial or Evidence of African Agency?

With the burgeoning South-South relations gaining prominence, there has been a progressive change in the donor regime in most African states. China’s relationship with Africa is not new, it dates as far back as when China sought the support of African states in its diplomatic tussle with Taiwan (Rich & Recker 2013: 62). As at 2007, over 800 Chinese companies were conducting business in 49 African states (ibid). Although China has since become the second largest bilateral donor in Africa, after the USA, the exact scale is not clear because of the merger of “traditional aid packages and other forms of investment” (ibid:68). Economics, however, remains the mainstay of the relationship between China and Africa. This is mainly because China adopts a non-interventionist approach in its international relations. This can be seen through its constant reluctance at the United Nations, to intervene in policies or actions that it believes will compromise the sovereignty of states. One of the reasons China’s relationship is positively viewed by some, is because it provides a development alternative hinged on trade, with the absence of interventionist policies that seek to change the state system and structures. Rich and Recker express that China operates a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell policy’ which essentially means that “as long as China has access to resources, they will not criticize or involve themselves in the domestic affairs of African states” (Rich & Recker, 2013:71). Critics, especially from the global north, find the dynamics of the Sino-Africa relationship unsettling. In one of her interviews, former Secretary of State of the United States of America, Hillary Clinton made this point:

“…[O]ur view is that over the long run, investments in Africa should be sustainable and for the benefit of the African people. It is easy – and we saw

that during colonial times…to come in, take out natural resources, pay off leaders, and leave. And when you leave, you don’t leave much behind for the people who are there. You don’t improve the standard of living. You don’t create a ladder of opportunity. We don’t want to see a new colonialism in Africa. We want, when people come to Africa and make investments, we want them to do well, but we also want them to do good. We don’t want them to undermine good governance. We don’t want them to basically deal with just the top elites and, frankly, too often pay for their concessions or their opportunities to invest (Clinton 2011)”.

The neo-colonial criticisms of China’s aid relationship with Africa finds root in the assumption that China is only concerned with making profit and acquiring stakes in Africa as opposed to a genuine interest in Africa’s development (Asongu & Aminkeng, 2013:266). Indeed, China is taking a lot from Africa, but it is argued that it is also providing what Africa needs based on states’ prescriptions (ibid). The provision of Foreign Direct Investments in areas like transportation and power, and loans to fill infrastructure gaps, with the aim of boosting economic growth, are some reasons Sino-African relations are seen as beneficial (Bräutigam 2018). Moyo (2011:111) explains that “...Africa is getting what it needs – quality capital that actually funds investment, jobs for its people and that elusive growth. These are the things that aid promised but has consistently failed to deliver.”

Africa’s relationship with China, just like its relationship with western donors paints a picture of unequal economic and power dynamics. Hence, both relationships have the potential to be neo-colonial or imperialist. However, one stark difference is China’s non-interventionist approach in the governance and policy space and its complete focus on trade, business and other economic relations. With China, African states feel more confident that “there are no hidden charges' With the nature of Africa’s relationship with China, African states are in a prime position to exert their agency and “tailor [their] relationship and address socio-economic matters” (Asongu and Aminkeng 2013:274). Taylor bluntly states that “any problem in

sino-African relations is found within Africa itself, with neo-patrimonial regimes that care little for development or properly directing inward investment, be it Chinese or any other” (Taylor 2007: 145). Although I disagree with Taylor’s single brush-stroke analysis of the inherent neopatrimonialism of all African states, he makes a good point about African states directing the tide and making most of their relationships.

## Case Studies

From East to West, African states function differently and uniquely. In the course of this essay, one of my major postulations has been that aid relationships operate differently, from state to state. The case studies that would be examined below historicises and contexualises some of the issues raised and I will conclude on whether aid relationships between states have been neo-colonial.

## Ethiopia

In 2018, Ethiopia was reported to have received the highest Official Development Assistance (ODA) in Africa, from western donors and other non-traditional donors (OECD 2018). What is perplexing about the Ethiopian situation is their ability to largely control their policy scene, while still maintaining the inflow of aid from diverse donors and sustaining its relationship with donors. Unlike most aid-recipient African states, Ethiopia was not colonized, thus it did not kick-start its aid relationship as a country with “weak domestic policy-setting structures” (Furtado & Smith:131). Because of its position as a sovereign entity without a pre-existing history of dominance and subservience, Ethiopia saw and still sees aid negotiations as transactions between equals (ibid). Ethiopia dictates the sphere of government agenda it wants donors to operate within. With an intense monopoly in public enterprises, the government ensures it has complete control of key industries, leaving non-contentious areas like social development programmes for donors (Furtado & Smith, 2009:141). The success of aid in Ethiopia is generally attributed to the low level of corruption, culture of discipline and widespread commitment across all governmental levels to the development of the state (ibid: 132). Brown and Fisher discuss the idea of a “developmental state”, these are states that “…possess strong willed visionary leaderships, whose commitment to delivering plans renders them particularly attractive partners” (Brown & Fisher, 2020:185).

Admittedly, Ethiopia’s leaders have historically been committed to the development of the state, grounded in the desire of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) to “transform the country and break out of poverty” (Cheru, 2016:595). However, the state’s leadership has been known for being authoritarian, with blatant disregard for human rights and a culture of silencing dissent (Human Rights Watch, 2010). This begs the question, why do western donors reel over Ethiopia without attempting to change its policies and essentially turning a blind eye to its misdeeds? The political and security interest of donors, arising from Ethiopia’s location in a relatively unstable part of Africa, may serve as an explanation. One of Brown and Fisher’s interview participants, an aid official, explained the tradeoff donors operating in Ethiopia make as follows: “Why do donors put up with it? We are here because Ethiopia is a strategic country and we have mutual interests. Ethiopia holds a key strategic position and we want to support it – ‘maybe at all costs’” (Brown & Fisher, 2020:195). Statements like this give life to assertions that aid relationships are solely created for donors’ benefit, as Langan put it, “altruistic largess” is a far cry from their intentions.

On Ethiopia’s relationship with China, there are arguments that China’s heavy presence in the state and Ethiopia’s deepening debt profile to China creates an unequal imperialist structure, which is detrimental to the development of the country. As explained in the preceding section, China seems to provide what recipient countries need. In the case of Ethiopia, China has contributed to its infrastructural development, provided quite a number of FDIs, and most importantly, leveraged on its relationship with the South to attract more aid from the North (Cheru 2016). When Ethiopia is examined through its historical relationship with aid donors, its geographical location, its political ideology and other relational factors, it is easy to see a pattern of a state with a development agenda, that has control of its decisions and policies and effectively asserts its agency in negotiations.

## Zambia

The political economy of Zambia is one that is riddled with economic liberalisation policies, debt crisis and numerous economic reforms fostered by conditionalities and structural reforms (Fraser, 2009:302). The emergence of the Movement for

Multiparty Democracy in the 1991 election was a turning point for Zambia’s economic strategy and its protracted dependence on aid (ibid). Fredrick Chilumba ran on a privatization manifesto that attracted donors and paved the way for the deepening of Zambia’s debt burden (ibid). Fraser asserts that although Zambia’s free-market ideology was pleasing to IFIs, it also opened the country to “spectacular looting of the national fiscus, negative growth rate, deindustralisation… and increasing poverty (Fraser, 2009:303). Kragelund, explains that Zambia’s debt burden was at $7.1 billion, which prompted the government to open itself up to more aid” (Kragelund 2014: 154). This eventually led to a “limited space for the Zambian government to create its own policies and a consequent reduction of the country’s sovereign frontier (ibid). He further expounds that although the Zambian Government have consistently tried to take control of the ‘sovereign frontier’, traditional donors have pushed back by proposing constitutional reforms with the aim of reducing Zambia’s autonomy (ibid). The eligibility for the Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative which required neo-liberal reforms serves as an example. One of the reforms required was the privatization of the Zambian National Commercial Bank (Fraser, 2009:312-313). As a result of the public outcry on the impact such privatization will have on job security and the availability of loan facilities in rural communities, President Mwanawasa tried to renegotiate terms with the IFIs (Fraser 2009:313). However, the IMF was quick to remind Zambia that it “risked forfeiting US$1 billion in debt relief” - Zambia eventually caved (ibid 314). This is just one of numerous examples of the push and pull that has hampered Zambia’s ownership of its development agenda and its policy space.

Zambia is also not excluded from the financial support that China offers. China has provided support to Zambia in the form of grants, loans and economic technical cooperation agreements (Rakner 2012:10). Through the provision of loans and grant to facilitate infrastructural development, China has been able to provide development finance to Zambia with minimal concessions (Kragelund, 2014:157). With the growing presence of non-traditional donors and the change in the political scene, Zambia in recent years, has been

emboldened to disagree with traditional donors and de-privatise companies in key industries (ibid). Although their relationship with traditional donors persists and deep economic challenges still exists, there is evidence of Zambia regaining control of its “sovereign frontier” (ibid:153).

## Discussion

I chose Ethiopia and Zambia as case studies as they are flip sides of the same coin. The case study of Ethiopia shows what happens to a country when it has complete agency. The case study of Zambia shows the consequences of when external parties are dominant in the economic and political scene. When compared to Ethiopia, it is clear that donors do not control the policy decisions of Ethiopian as they do in Zambia. As explained, this could be as a result of Ethiopia’s non-colonization, assertiveness in negotiations, political will and development agenda. Zambia’s weak institutions on the other hand, high debt profile and existing conditionalities attached to aid makes it difficult for the state to negotiate favourable policies. Therefore, when donors impose oppressive conditions, as they have in Zambia that gags the recipient state and essentially puts them between a rock and a hard place, such aid relationship can rightly be considered neo-colonial.

## Conclusion

This essay has asserted that aid relationships can be neo-colonial, depending on the level of control that recipient states have in the policy space. By discussing the varying meanings of sovereignty, I expound that sovereignty goes beyond static politico-legal independence but extends to states’ ability to make decisions for themselves and control their developmental narrative. This is usually influenced by a state’s historical formation, political ideology, negotiations and relationships. The use of Ethiopia and Zambia as case studies demonstrate this point by showing how the dependency created in Zambia as a result of colonialism and the state’s long history of dysfunction contributed to its “loss of voice” in negotiating aid. The case of Ethiopia on the other hand shows that the many interests of donors shape the dynamics of donor-recipient relationship, which is not always grounded in benevolence.

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