# Governing the ungovernable

# Donor agencies and the politics of development in Africa

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The failure of development in Africa, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, since the beginning of the post-independence era, has resulted in intense discourse both in academia and in the public domains. The blame game between the so-called "developing countries" and their donor counterparts has, over the past six decades, been an area of intense analysis due to the conditions often imposed by donor agencies on their recipients. The unequal relationship between the recipient and the donor has influenced the success and/or failure of donor-funded development programs. This article is theory-based; and, it examines the skewed relationship between sub-Saharan African governments and international donor agencies and its influence on success and/or failures of such interventions. Data was gathered using a systematic review of the literature with specific focus on themes related to donor agencies and their relationship with Africa. The analysis was thematic; isolating key issues relevant to the topic. The article argues that states in sub-Saharan Africa should manage and govern the seemingly ungovernable donor agencies. Importantly, politicisation of foreign development assistance for Africa should be eliminated through approaches that develop solid resource-base and increased African state capacity manage and govern own affairs with minimal, if any, external influence of the stultifying donor agencies.

#### INTRODUCTION

The post-independence development discourse in Africa has been, and continues to be, a very divisive issue in academic literature (Oya 2006; Makuwira 2011; Easterly 2006). In part, this has been necessitated by the growing inequality within and among African countries, which ultimately has raised a number of questions as to why, despite huge volumes of foreign development assistance, Africa remains one of the least developed continents in the world (Moyo 2009a; Mills 2010). While there has been a significant commentary on

why aid to Africa has not helped to spur growth (see Birdsall 2004; Easterly 2007; Moyo 2009b), there has been very little engagement in examining how African leadership mutually engage their donor counterparts in the governance of foreign development assistance. The presence of donor agencies in sub-Saharan Africa over the past seven decades has had its own dynamics on the recipient countries. Yet very little evidence exists to highlight, for example, how African governments control aid flow and, at the same time, dictate the terms of reference. The aim of this article is to offer a critical examination of how countries can manage their relationship with donor agencies. While the article is predominantly theory based, the purpose is to examine the skewed relationship between African Governments and their ways of managing donor agencies in order to realise their (African Governments) development agenda.

#### **DONOR AGENCIES AND AID FLOW TO AFRICA**

Over the last decade, the debate on aid effectiveness has taken a new dimension amid growing concern that aid to developing countries has been and continues to be ineffective (OECD 2008). Increasingly, there is also a deliberate effort within donor agencies to try and coordinate their activities in a way that ensures maximum impact, while at the same time, dealing with the complex landscape of Sub-Saharan African politics. While this is the case, Africa is privileged to house aid inflows of \$134 billion every year (Sharpes, Jones & Martin

Table 1: Top 10 bilateral and Multilateral Donor agencies and top to 10 African recipients

	2.1.1. Top 10 ODA receipts by recipient USD million, net disbursements in 2013				2.1.4. Top 10 ODA donors USD million, net disbursements in 2013			
1	Egypt	5 506	10%	1	United States	8 979	16%	
2	Ethiopia	3 826	7%	2	IDA	6 072	11%	
3	Tanzania	3 430	6%	3	EU Institutions	5 973	11%	
4	Kenya	3 236	6%	4	United Arab Emirates	4 761	9%	
5	Democratic Republic of the Congo	2 572	5%	5	United Kingdom	3 922	7%	
6	Nigeria	2 529	5%	6	France	3 169	6%	
7	Mozambique	2 314	4%	7	Global Fud	2 523	5%	
8	Morocco	1 966	4%	8	Germany	2 397	4%	
9	Uganda	1 693	3%	9	African Development Bank	2 324	4%	
10	South Sudan	1 447	3%	10	Japan	2 092	4%	
Other recipients		27 272	49%	Other donors		13 581	24%	
Total		55 793	100%	Total		55 793	100%	

Source: OECD, 2015: 2



2014). But out of this figure, it is estimated that \$192 billion goes out, leaving a net loss of \$58 billion every year (Ndikumana & Boyce 2012). Sharples *et al.* (2014) document that most of the loss is through profits made by multinational companies; debt payments, often following irresponsible loans; illicit financial flows facilitated by the global network of tax havens; in foreign currency reserves given as loans to other governments; illegal logging; illegal fishing; migration of skilled workers from Africa; climate change adaptation; low carbon economic growth. These huge inflows of money, some of which comes in the form of *Overseas Development Assistance* (ODA), means high levels of presence of donors on the continent. While space does not allow to highlight the diversity of international donor agencies and their relationship with African countries, the United States of America supports 47 countries in Africa while Sweden supports 37 and Denmark 26 (OECD 2015). Countries like Germany, Canada, The Netherlands, France, Spain, Portugal, Norway, just to name a few, are actively engaged in providing bilateral aid to African countries.

The presence of such high level contingency of donor agencies following their resources and how to manage it in a foreign land is an issue of significance. This is especially so not only from an international relations perspective but also from a public administration point of view. However, to date, the manner in which donors and their recipients engage in a mutual conversation in managing funding has not yet received equal attention in the literature. There is also a new dimension to this dynamic that the large amount of money poured into Africa has, over the decades, created what many commentators call aid dependency (McGowan & Smith 1978; Moyo 2009b; Mills 2010). It is the dependency syndrome that creates perpetual need for foreign donor assistance and to which donor policies are exercised in full force at the expense of locally-owned development policies. The question that emerges out of this skewed relationship between donor agencies and their counterparts is how do African countries manage or create governance mechanisms in order to contain unfavourable donor policies and conditionalities? The answer does not lie in quick fixes. Rather, given the long history behind the role of donor agencies on the African continent, it requires long term planning which integrates various approaches to engage in negotiations at social, political and economic levels. But first, there is need for a better understanding of donor policies, which, very often, mask the political agendas. The section that follows attempts to highlight these in more depth.

## POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS AND HIDDEN AGENDAS

It has to be understood that aid to Africa does not come as a free gift. It always comes with conditions (Hofmeier 1991; Mosley, Harrigan & Toye 1995; Akonor 2013). This is not only to governments – even to organisations that fall under the category of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). But, in the context of this article, an analysis of government, as a development institution, is followed in order to appreciate the hidden agendas donors impose on their recipients. More importantly, to canvass the governance of this state of affair in Africa.

For over half a century, the international community has pumped almost a trillion dollars in the name of aid to Africa (Barder 2010). Yet, to date, it is only the African continent that has a poor track record of utilising foreign aid for its development. The question many ask

is – why? Why, for example, should Nigeria receive foreign development assistance or aid when it is Africa's largest oil producer, yet, in 2011, received \$1.72 billion in foreign aid (Ogunlesi 2013). Why should a country like South Africa, with its wealth of resources, fail to reduce poverty amongst its citizenry? Why should it receive both foreign aid in form of technical assistance? Part of the answer lies in the way in which various types of foreign development assistance is disbursed and the kind of conditions that are packaged against such. This also has a history of its own that needs to be unpacked in order to appreciate the complex landscape of the political economy of aid giving. But understanding all that is one side of the story. The focus for this article, just to recap is to answer the question: how can the politics of aid giving be governed and managed?

# **Structural Reform Agenda**

We have often heard that for aid to be given, governments, in particular, have to undertake particular structural reform. Under the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), these reforms came under what was known as Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). While SAPs were not foreign development assistance, they allowed countries to get a loan from the two institutions on condition that they will be willing, for example, to cut public spending, devalue their local currencies, eliminate any form of government subsidies, and/or introduce user fees which, for many African countries would mean paying for water (Abugre 2000). While this article is not about the lending facilities available to developing countries, it is worth noting that the World Bank and IMF through its International Development Association, often uses its lending facilities to disburse funds to their recipient or beneficiary countries. For example, the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) is one such facility. Importantly, in the process of lending, these institutions often prescribe certain commitments that countries have to satisfy and/or adhere to. These may come as prior actions or benchmarks. As listed above, while the two institutions may push for quantitative conditions - often a set of macro-economic policy prescriptions, the ones that have hurt Africa badly are the structural policy prescriptions which, besides policy conditions named above, also include trade reform, price liberalisation and privatisation (Eurodad 2006). Not only are the conditionalities counter productive to development progress in Africa but, given also the exorbitant interest rates that go with these conditionalities, countries are caught in the vicious cycle of dependency as they grapple to repay the loans and let alone, huge backlog on accumulative interests. Sogge (1996) observed that for every one dollar (US\$) donated in the name of aid to Africa, donors made US\$14 in return through all the various policy prescriptions highlighted above.

While aid giving may sound like a noble idea, conditionalities, especially on the African continent, have had a series of geo-political shifts which, when closely analysed, only help to refocus the same problem into a different state. A typical example is Zimbabwe where despite *looking to the East* by opening up to the Chinese as a new donor, the significance of the shift is not strikingly different (Makuwira 2011). The same kind of policy prescriptions abound, although more fluid than those from Western donors. What has happened over the years has been a glaring opening up of trade between African countries and countries that masquerade as donors but exploitative to the extent were most African countries have no way to escape but to accept the reality of:



- persistent influence of foreign traders who have regard for trade rules;
- capital flight as most of these traders have very little interest to invest in African countries; and,
- suppression of local entrepreneurship at the preference of foreign traders (Gukurume 2012).

# Structural Reforms and Development Implications for Africa

A snapshot of the conditionality debate and development in Africa provides a fertile ground to re-engage with contemporary debates on the role of development organisations and the public in Africa. If we consider a government as a public institution, then we have a good reason to worry about the trend explicated in the preceding section where overseas development assistance is used as an instrument of control over local African development initiatives. For example, the United Kingdom's new policy links foreign development assistance to a country's track record on sexual rights. This has been the case in Malawi and Uganda where the issue of gay marriage has been quite contentious (Makuwira 2011; Warwick 2013). It can therefore be argued that such processes of control and hegemony invite a type of governance and management where a sovereign state has the right to exercise its powers and legitimacy without foreign intervention in domestic politics. Governance in this article will be used interchangeably with management; although the two concepts have a slightly different meaning. Governance in this article is defined not only in terms of transparency and accountability but, as aptly described by Tony Blair (2013: 2), as "the ability of governments in developing countries to get things done. To deliver the life-changing improvements their citizens expect".

Getting things done is indeed something Africa has failed to do better. In part, this comes under the backdrop of the way Africa relies heavily on donor agencies. Edwards (2014), for example, acknowledges in his book *Toxic Aid: Economic Collapse and Recovery in Tanzania*, that foreign aid affects recipient countries in myriad and complex ways and through multiple and changing ways. This is why we cannot apply one yardstick as a measure of success in different socio-political contexts that keep changing with the current fluxes of global economic order. This takes me to the point which echoes the way Africa deals with the complex development issues including the manner in which foreign development assistance is provided and managed in recipient countries.

## AFRICA: A DEPENDENT CONTINENT

Africa is the only continent with the largest number of countries that largely depend on aid for the great part of development activities (Fraser & Whitfield 2008). By inference, this state of affairs stifles what may commonly be known as *ownership*. Because of the increasing surveillance on what needs to be done, how it needs to be done, the African states have to continually maintain a kind of relationship which is not in their favour, but rather in the favour of the partner with more resources. Inevitably, the African states and their weak institutions have to struggle to keep the buoyancy of negotiation and control over policy and implementation. These are critical issues that have to be managed and properly governed.

Turning to the theme of the article, because of the fact that some Africa countries receive funding from more than one donor or funding source, the management of these multiple demands create a quandary not only in dealing with the politics of aid but also on the fact that at times, governments have to deal with other governments through aid architecture. While research is scarce on how African countries deal with donor demands, the little evidence available in the literature does not provide ample scope to make inferences on how Africa governments and their development institutions deal with all these multiple realities (Williams 2007; Bolton 2007; Fraser & Whitfield 2008). However, it seems very clear that the point at which recipient countries get caught out is at the very initial stage where negotiations to receive aid begin. To negotiate is to make your position very clear. In the context where a donor offers a support to a developing country, the power play is glaringly visible given that one entity enters the negotiating table already disadvantaged. This point needs special attention because if the negotiator is not careful enough, the outcome will be a total submission to all the conditions applied prior to the release of funds as has been the case over the years. Thus, a negotiation point is a political entry point full of ideological positioning as well as political and geo-political consideration.

It has to be considered also that when governments enter into negotiations with a particular donor, say Department for International Development (DfID), USAID and other bilateral donor agencies, they are in essence, negotiating with a government. Only that at that point in time, two institutions are being represented by individuals who are government officials. Such processes will not only require skills to fairly understand what is possible but also what is not possible. The boundaries between are very fluid and can only be appreciated in the context within which negotiations take place. One of the critical aspects of managing this stage is how a country sells its institutions. Donors are usually interested in anything that demonstrates that it is worth value for money. Value for money is a bargaining tool where a donor willingly opens up to provide support in return for something tangible and something that adds value to an existing situation. As argued by Makuwira (2014), the current aid effectiveness debate has moved from how much money is spent on development projects or programs to, what impact does the money make to those that it is intended to serve. It is this ideological shift among donor agencies as well as aid skeptics that we see a significant change in the way aid is viewed and spent by the recipient countries. It is now no longer about volume of money, but what has changed.

The second crucial point in the management and governance of donor agencies is to understand their ideological position. For a long time, Africa has been viewed from a deficit lense – a continent that always needs help. At independence in the early 1960s, Africanists – those who challenged the colonial regimes across Africa, had noble intentions of freeing Africa from the yoke of colonial oppression. Yet despite this move, the leadership was not prepared enough in terms of the capacity to manage the *free* African colonies. Almost immediately after declaring independence, they went back to the colonial masters to seek help. Rather than reintroducing public administration, the new form of governance by the colonising powers was to offer what has now become to be known as *technical assistance*. This move was to haunt Africa for decades to come. What *technical assistance* has done is to paint a picture of inefficacy among African countries and its leadership that, Africa still needs to learn something from its former colonial masters. In other words, this is also about knowledge domination. Whether this is done with good intention or otherwise, the process



has largely been adopted by many donors to who, while providing development support to African governments, the way development programmes are designed, implemented, monitored and evaluated reflect almost exclusively this foreign approach to development. Today, most African countries are often viewed as in need of *capacity*. In part, this is true, however, it is the manner in which the notion of capacity is framed that perpetuates the belief that without capacity, things will not be done. Not surprisingly, the colonial masters mutated into new colonisers who, this time around did not need to administer the former colonies physically. Rather, through technical assistance they were able to impose new forms of governance. Aptly articulated by Harold Nyikal (2005), the state in Africa today is chained to global policies. Nyikal (2005:1) observes:

The policies enforced on poor African countries... have chained Africa to continued dependence on Western economies for more subsistence, by preventing self-help to the continents economic problems. However, the same policies seem to favour trade imbalances to the already wealthy Western economies over the struggling ones in Africa. This economic colonization of Africa has done and continues to do as much damage to the continent as the imperial colonization and its after effects did.

In his work titled *Balancing the Act in Foreign Development Assistance*, Makuwira (2013) is of the opinion that part of the solution to the new form of administration by the West through its ill-informed policies is to progressively establish institutions of self-sustenance within Africa. Ghana, Ethiopia and at one point, Malawi, have all attempted to employ measures to manage and provide for locally-based solutions to dependency. Moss, Peterson & Walle (2006) argue for strengthening local institutions which, in the long run, may provide a platform for strong revenue collection which, for an aid-dependent country, needs desperately. One such measure is taxation. Taxation, if well managed, has the potential to enable a country to be self-sufficient and be economically sustainable. However, proponents of this thesis (see Solignac-Lecomte 2010; Fjeldstad 2011), are quick to point out that a critical success factor though, is to ensure that corruption is eliminated altogether.

# POLITICAL REGIME AS PANACEA TO DONORS MANAGEMENT

There is also an emerging body of literature which posits that having a political regime can bolster the ability of a country to be responsive and provide checks and balances in the governance of donor politics (Heller & Gupta 2002; Brautigam & Knack 2004). By political regime, it means the extent to which a set of institutions are able to determine the nature of political power to the point where such structures become a bond between government and its citizens. Fundamental to this position is the fact that the more a country heavily relies on aid, the more the gap between government and citizens. The structures of accountability and transparency tend to be lost in the process. Accountability on part of the government ceases to be downwards – to where citizens are. Rather it becomes an upward accountability to donors. The fact that any kind of external aid flows to a country compromises the relationship between government and citizens, is a great concern for emerging economies in Africa.

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This is mainly the case because Africa require its citizens to be mobilised for development and, more importantly, to feel they own the development process. This is echoed by Moore (1998), who noted the link between "unearned" money and ineffective institutional weaknesses in countries where aid dominated. More often than not, when development aid is given, there is very little attempt to think about public institutional capacity to execute the planned activities. This selective amnesia, if you like, further weakens such critical development institutions. Because what it means is the human resource therein can develop apathy as they may feel far removed from the processes which could have been engaging and make them feel they are part of the process. The administration of aid, thus, dominates at the expense of strengthening the link between the aid architecture and the people it aims to serve.

#### SHARED VISION

Development institutions are shaped by visions and missions. These two provide a sense of direction a country wants to take in its development agenda. However, over the years there has not been a critical assessment of the extent to which a country's vision shapes its direction to the extent where such a vision is regarded as an instrument of control and power. When the World Bank imposed the popular Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) in the early 2000s, the idea was to provide governments with an opportunity to put forward a case for debt relief (IMF 2005). For countries who developed a clear vision on how funds earmarked for debt repayment was going to be used for development purpose, it (the vision/ strategy) became an instrument of negotiation. This was proven by countries like Botswana, Ethiopia and Rwanda who, due to their clear public policy vision of how their countries will move forward in their translation of the vision to action, was able to allow donors to accept entering into a win-win kind of partnership. Therefore, a country's vision, when clearly articulated into a coherent development policy, can provide a platform for negotiation and control (Fraser & Whitfield 2008). More importantly, national development agendas are political statements of intent which, if well-articulated, reflect national aspirations. The advantage of using vision as an instrument for managing and governing donors is to the advantage of specific governments as they demonstrate not only readiness to engage in doing things but as a form of accountability which many donor agencies espouse.

# LOOK ELSEWHERE, BUT WEST

The current aid architecture is in a state of flux. Gone are the days when aid disbursement was the solo prerogative of Western donors. Today, there new players on the field who have moved from recipient countries to new donors. Today the big story in academic analysis is the role of China, India, Brazil, South Africa, Russia and the Arab donors, have all emerged to play critical roles in development financing (Mohan & Power 2008; Brautigam 2009; Makuwira 2011; Walz & Ramachandran 2011). This new landscape is a contested terrain of new ideology and geo-strategic interests. For African countries, this new landscape has provided a new direction and fresh approach to development financing. For example, the



role of China in Africa is hailed as a new wave of donor-recipient relationship where China flexes its muscles by *claiming* not imposing too many conditionalities (Makuwira 2011). This political gimmick is seen in the eyes of some Africa countries as a lee-way to run away from the stringent Western donors whose policy prescription are believed to have eroded Africa of its pride and potential and enriched the West more than Africa (Rodney 1973; Osei 2005). The fact that many Africa countries are *opting out* of the West in preference for the *East* is, in itself, an instrument that Africa is either inadvertently using to manage its Western donor counterparts. It is, as one can put it, a power choice which has proved to irritate the West.

### CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that African political landscape is changing as the new international political order is also on the constant move. The article has highlighted that the current aid architecture espouses a tradition that often sees African countries as needy and often lacking the means to attend to the needs of their citizenry. Despite the significant gains Africa has made over the past five to seven decades, there is very little appreciation by the Western donor agencies of where Africa is. This perception has continually invited spurts of donor agencies to provide aid to Africa with strings attached. For African countries, these conditionalities have not been matched with equally strategic response due to lack of capacity to demonstrate readiness to engage in dealing with matters of critical interest to the continent. Thus wave after wave of conditionalities have eroded Africa of its right to choose its destiny.

The article has argued that time has come for Africa to take a stand. This is a stand not against conditionalities only but to develop means and ways in which it can manage the politics of development aid. It is suggested that Africa needs to acknowledge its own political style as a regime that can be used to leverage its engagement with traditional donors whose policy prescriptions have badly hurt Africa. The governance of donor agencies is not an easy task. The political nature of aid needs to be understood within the context within which donors operate. Thus, Africa countries can develop an intra-African aid platform where rather than looking elsewhere for development financing, Africa countries can do so from within. Strengthening development institutions within Africa requires developing economic base whose ripple effects can be used to finance such development initiatives with less focus to the West.

Visionary leadership is lacking in many African countries. However, evidence has it that where countries have demonstrated a clear and coherent vision for development, have they been able to use it as a negotiating tool against draconian aid conditionalities. However, this in itself is not the end; rather, a country's vision should be seen as a starting point to develop strategies that are shared nationally and to which donors acknowledge as national flagship for such countries' aspirations.

Africa's new development terrain has, lately, been a battleground for competing ideological donor space as new donors from the East have challenged the orthodoxy. As demonstrated in this article, not only does this provide a platform for African countries to negotiate term and conditions of funding. But through such a shift in geo-political dynamism, African countries have a voice against the dominance of the Western donor agencies whose

policies have always been under constant scrutiny by Africa governments. Looking to the East can therefore be used as an instrument of control and management as well. Overall, what the article has demonstrated is that Africa will never be the same. There are increased sensitivities across Africa as to the new form neo-colonialism and power is exercised. Therefore, this article recommends that there should be a short, medium and long-term approach to developing a solid resource base which will result in increased capacity of African governments to manage their own affairs with less influence from the stultifying donor agencies. Second, there is need for a deeper understanding of the political economy of foreign development assistance and how donors use aid to govern their recipients. Third, African countries need to develop appropriate mechanisms to manage donors and their policies in a mutually beneficial manner. Lastly but not least, there is need to seek ways in which African countries can "graduate" from foreign development assistance but ensuring that this is done in a timely manner where African leadership is ready to govern with accountability and transparency.

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