

African Agency not the Western 'Saviour' Will Save Africa

The role of Western foreign aid in Africa has recently returned to the centre of animated debates.

This is an old debate, recast anew in light of recent developments. Democracy-promoters, human rights activists and scholars-activists both in Africa and in the West want Western governments and aid agencies to [stop aiding governments](#) seen as undemocratic and engaged in human rights abuses. Others have made an even bolder call: Western powers should use their leverage to cause regime change in countries like Uganda.

Among the recent developments include the crisis in the Ethiopian region of Tigray where federal forces pursued a perceived reneged regional government, triggering a humanitarian crisis. Then the excesses of the Museveni government in Uganda as he maintains a grip on power after 35 years of interrupted rule, plus the never-ending charges against Rwandan President Paul Kagame by Western journalists, the latest in the [UK's Guardian newspaper](#).

These and others are the latest grounds for summoning the ostensible force of foreign aid to whip African governments into behaving. As I have argued [elsewhere](#), the justification of the use of foreign aid as leverage for externally instigated political reform or even regime change is both morally problematic and empirically questionable.

First, using the aid argument to demand for respect for human rights, civil liberties and political freedoms inadvertently suggests the advocates would care less if the governments at fault were not aid recipients.

In a Twitter altercation with one American human rights activist, she retorted she cannot stand her tax dollars going towards funding the repressive regime of Mr Museveni in Uganda. Well, I said, there are Ugandans too paying taxes in Uganda, those who support Museveni and those who oppose him. Better to leave the matter of removing or retaining Museveni to those two sets of Ugandans.

I also put it to her that as a Ugandan resident in the USA for 10 years now, I pay taxes on every income I earn but have zero voice in the politics of my host country. My political voice and right to demand for accountability lies only in my country of birth and citizenship – Uganda.

Second, and more deeply problematic, is the erroneous assumption that all aid is benign and charitable. Aid is not always a free gift. It serves a range of diplomatic and defence purposes for the benefactors. Geostrategic calculations and long-term economic goals are part of the aid calculus. That is why the neediest nations are not necessarily the leading recipients of aid, and it is partly the reason aid flows continue even when not serving the officially stated purpose for the ostensible beneficiaries. If it is serving the intended goals for the givers, it matters less whether aid actually makes a difference to the recipients.

Also, seen at another level aid is some kind of business that serves the career interests of decision-makers and employees who have vested interests that may stand quite apart from the needs and rights of supposed beneficiaries.

Third, from a practical standpoint, aid as a tool for pushing through political reforms has a grim history from the era of Structural Adjustment Programmes. As three critics pointed out in a recent [CODESRIA article](#), rather than advance genuine democratic government, aid conditionalities and the good governance agenda in fact subverted deliberative democracy and undermined avenues for true citizen engagement. The net

outcome was what the late Thandika Mkandawire referred to as [‘choiceless democracies.’](#)

More broadly, exporting democracy through military intervention and the use of levers of financial power can scarcely deliver the kind of sustainable, accountable and stable political systems that advocates otherwise want to root for. There are countless tragic cases all over the world.

What is more, even from strict economic efficacy and impact, the aid argument sits on a decidedly shaky platform. Critics have long showed that foreign aid, particularly bilateral and multilateral grants and loans along with certain types of humanitarian aid, in part driven by the [‘white man’s burden,’](#) has [hurt rather than helped](#) the African continent. If in fact aid was such an indispensable source of pulling poor countries out of the trap of poverty, today Africa wouldn’t be occupying the lowest rungs of official growth and development indices.

Western ‘friends’ of Africa who are so concerned and determined to do good for the continent, to be sure, have African citizens keen to embrace foreign support, often oblivious of the condescension embedded in narratives that seek to ‘save’ Africa. Ordinarily, outside solidarity and well-meaning support should be welcome, but only if prudently channelled towards a sound local strategy and the viable pursuit of meaningful transformation rather than the perpetuation of dependence and domination.

Western paternalism of old, of seeing African as always hopelessly in need of being saved by outsiders, cannot bring about the change we need. The continent has been the focus of an army of experts in academia, the media and technocratic corridors of western institutions and governments.

They have authored policy papers and blueprints for the World Bank, testified before lawmakers in the EU, UK and US, designed and implemented aid programmes for DFID and USAID.

They are experts at leading Western universities treated with authorial reverence and bestowed on near intellectual invincibility as the definitive voices on specific African countries.

At an instructive meeting on African politics and security in Washington DC sometime in 2019, several speakers in the room who said anything about Ethiopia were quick to ask if a certain renowned expert on the country was present to endorse or object. I and another African colleague with years of research in Ethiopia did not matter.

Part of the problem here in fact lies in the hubristic claim to the expertise of a complex continent and countries where even the natives lack the full grasp of societies that invariably defy broad-brush conclusions and stylised representations. I am Ugandan and have for years carefully studied the country's political history and strived to come to grips with its social landscape, yet I always insist on the caveat that mine is but only limited and partial knowledge, short of the claim to being an expert.

The struggle for African socioeconomic and political liberation has to be anchored in African agency not foreign '[saviour mentality](#)' that supposedly seeks to save a helpless people. Whether it is economic emancipation or political liberation, the sources and forces of change have to be organically situated among African peoples. This is a no-brainer.

African liberation agendas have historically built on Pan-African ideals articulated and pursued from within the continent and among the Diasporas since the era of abolition. Today, freedom is spoken of as a universal value and practice, but for a long time it was nearly conceived as exclusive to one race until at least the Haitian Revolution started the processes of its universalisation.