

The problem with the foreign aid refrain

When writing about Africa, the Western media (and academia) almost always never fail to underline three things that supposedly define the continent: war, poverty and aid.

The first two are seen as inherently internal to the continent, the third is the external solution. Regardless of the topic, it is standard practice to emphasise that 'this conflict-prone and the impoverished African nation of XYZ receives almost one billion in foreign aid from...'

The goal of this framing is two-fold. First, to cast Africa as trapped in a permanent Hobbesian state of nature where war, poverty, and disease reign supreme and where the masses are helpless and hopeless.

The cover pages of *Time Magazine* of January 1984 ([Coups, Conflict, and Corruption](#)) and *The Economist* of May 2000 ([Hopeless Continent](#)) underscored precisely this message, deliberately sensational and salacious. With a tinge of serendipity, the same *Economist* magazine returned with a screaming cover headline of '[Africa Rising](#)' just a decade later!

Second, and perhaps more important in the broader scheme of things, the framing is intended to magnify the saviour-role needed from outsider actors without whom, ostensibly, the continent's people would have no lives and livelihoods. It is to remind us of the civilizational mission of the West and why we should pay heed to Western lectures on 'good governance'.

In the mainstream media and academic circles, keeping with the old modernisation school, the causes of conflict and the persistence of poverty are purely internal to the continent – in the main, these are problems seen as germane to the

'traditional' nature of African societies and the inability to ditch archaic cultures and embrace modernity.

In this narrative, there is little regard for the history of global capitalist exploitation and the structural inequalities that condemn certain countries and continents to poverty while granting vast advantages to others – the winners and losers of the global economy.

It is instructive that this framing and thinking, which held sway in the mainstream of the 1950s and 60s, is still the dominant lens and remains with us more than a half-century later. The posited solution to Africa's problem is some form of external force, be it the embrace of Western modernity or solicitation of Western patronage. The aid industry emerged, evolved, and thrived within this thinking that Africa's problems of poverty and 'backwardness' can be cured from outside.

There is a problem though, in fact, two. For starters, Western foreign aid in Africa has had, at best, a poor record and, at worst, a deleterious impact on the continent. If aid was as critical and indispensable as it's often made to appear, Africa wouldn't be where it is today. But it is not just about Africa. It is difficult to find any compelling case around the world where aid delivered a people from poverty to prosperity or where a country moved from third to first world status courtesy of foreign aid.

The second problem with the aid refrain is the misleading picture it conjures, of Africa as a passive recipient of external charity. Those who accent how much this African country or the other gets in aid from Western benefactors say nothing about what the country in question or the continent as a whole loses or gives away to external actors and agents.

As historically the go-to place for cheap extraction, unfettered exploitation, and despoliation of natural and human

resources, on a large scale, since at least the days of the evil triangular Atlantic Slave Trade, the haemorrhage the continent has suffered is simply immeasurable. Yet this historical reality tends to be treated with a sleight of hand.

As Walter Rodney argued in his seminal work [How Europe Underdeveloped Africa](#), the continent was inserted into the circuits of capitalist exploitation on the terms, and to the benefit, of Western interests and not those of Africa and its people. The overarching logic of exchange and the fundamental relationship between Africa and outside economic actors (backed up by the military and political power of their home states) have not changed in a significant way to the present. In fact, in some respects, the exploitation has worsened.

For example, Western media commentaries will emphasise the amount of foreign aid to the Congo but say nothing about the resources of that country that are in the hands of Western corporations and the extraction that thrives for which the people of Congo have little to no benefit.

Since it was cynically named the 'Congo Free State,' and became the personal real estate of King Leopold, the Congo's seemingly in-exhaustive natural resources have caused that country immense pain at the hands of greedy external actors along with their local agents and acolytes.

[Patrick Bond](#) has recently pointed out that the value of depleted non-renewable resources for the continent and the broader ecological destruction are enormous yet often sidelined in standardised GDP debates.

The estimated loss of what Patrick Bond calls 'natural capital' is north of \$100 billion every year. Compare that with the pre-pandemic (2019) Official Development Assistance (ODA) of [about \\$55 billion](#) to so-called Sub-Saharan Africa. Needless to say, not all ODA is free money nor is it 'assistance' of a purely humanitarian nature!

What is more, illicit financial flows from the continent are estimated at more than [\\$50 billion annually](#). Again, it is the Congo that is arguably most emblematic of this tragedy of blunt exploitation and crass capitalism.

Last week, [Bloomberg News](#) reported that 'The Democratic Republic of Congo lost out on nearly \$2 billion in revenue by selling mining and oil assets to Israeli billionaire Dan Gertler.' Mr. Gertler was placed under sanctions by the US government and is reported to be close friends with former Congolese President, Joseph Kabila!

In all, the losses the continent suffers through all manner of dubious business dealings and capitalist manoeuvres are difficult to quantify but by every estimate are far greater than the aid that is signposted so repeatedly. From sophisticated tax evasions, huge tax exemptions, and mispricing of assets to shipping out loads of raw materials, what Africa loses to the West, and now increasingly to the East as well, far exceeds the aid it gets for which Africans must always be reminded of as if to be told to remain eternally grateful.