Unpacking Aid in Africa- The Decolonization Turn

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WHERE IS THE MONEY COMING FROM?

Is development aid invested in Africa a beacon of hope or an example of 'Afro-pessimism'?[1] Today, Africa finds itself at a crucial juncture of development with a growing population, burgeoning market, expanding resource base, and, more importantly, a willingness to orchestrate a future driven by an African development vision. The vital caveat in this discussion is that Africa's bright future is not merely privy to African nation-states or its citizens but finds itself within policy briefs of Western countries, budgets of philanthropic organizations, and audit reports of development partners. Rooted within the call to decolonize knowledge, systems, and universities, there is a growing agreement that philanthropy in Africa must be decolonized (Krauss, 2018). Development aid must be unpacked to engage with colonial and hegemonic institutions, power, and dynamics that operate or structure it.

Development practitioners engaging with African development, its multiple futures, and stakes highlight essential considerations to critically analyze the colonial basis of aid invested in Africa. Firstly, scholars question the characterization of aid as a free handout or a generous investment for improving 'unhopeful' lives. The reality is that support in Africa is conditional, directed at strategic interest to gain influence, partners, workers, market, and resources, to name a few (Iweala, 2017). The second complexity is the investment history and the ideology that propels it. Historically, Africans were 'helped' to 'liberate' and 'save' them by displaying poverty and violence as the continent's reality (Goris & Magendane, 2021). This ideological basis laid the ground for humanitarian interventions and logic wherein infrastructure was built to reinforce colonial purposes, exposing the lasting overlap between aid and colonialism in its operations. Colonialism extends far beyond the occupation of 'territory' by force (Banerjee & Shriram, 2022). Within this context, the call for decolonization means that acts of generosity cannot absolve individuals (read philanthropists) from accountability for their actions.

Thirdly, the sector's expected investment outcome from 'capacity building' to 'capacity bridging' by rooting philanthropy in social justice, equality, representation, and empowerment is a recurring debate (Peace Direct et al., 2023). An often-quoted argument is that humanitarianism historically disabled African states to not invest in their development or generate wealth for development purposes (Goris, 2021). Does the call for decolonization imply a complete withdrawal of humanitarian aid to help states find their grounding, and is a disconnected approach the solution to incoming foreign aid in an interconnected world (Krauss, 2018)? While problematizing the basis of philanthropy in Africa, this paper also engages with possible policy solutions that, rather than absolving philanthropists of responsibility, look at involving Africans as equal partners within the aid ecosystem.

GOOD-HEARTED PHILANTHROPISTS IN A COMPLICATED TERRITORY?

The starving African figure splashed across philanthropic initiatives is presented as the rallying call for

development investment in Africa (Krauss, 2018). The complexity in this characterization is in the power dynamic of aid flow between former colonial powers and colonies and the construction of the 'beneficiary' as the postcolonial other. For instance, to counteract Africa's 'stagnant' economy, two aid-based programs by the IMF and World Bank were developed in the form of structural adjustment and stabilization without any critical or contextual analysis (Brent, 1990; Kalu, 2018). This "carrot-and-stick" approach relied on unproven development theories, engineered conditions, and interventions like debt pricing, servicing, privatization, and trade regulation aimed at one-size-fits-all solutions (Abugre, 2010).

Furthermore, local civil society groups are shaped to fit the 'NGO' model, and 'local staff' complies with 'international' norms to participate in the development process (Goris, 2021). In this context, philanthropy inadvertently perpetuates and strengthens existing power dynamics rooted in suffering and disenfranchisement. The relationship works against its original intention, contributing to maintaining inequitable power structures. According to a Vodafone Foundation and Clear view report, funding from US foundations to Africa experienced a remarkable surge, escalating by over 400% from $288.8 million in 2002 to nearly $1.5 billion in 2012 (Mishra, 2023). However, most of this funding was channeled to organizations headquartered outside Africa. The predominant recipients were domesticated INGOs with African headquarters but registered as local partners. These sophisticated civil society organizations featured influential individuals on their boards who were technologically adept and proficient in the language of Western development partners (Iweala, 2017). Paradoxically, this approach tended to weaken local groups rather than empower them. The purported aim of trans-localization failed to shift power dynamics to local entities, as the close association with global funders provided INGOs with an unfair advantage, creating a hierarchy in funding accessibility (Moyo & Imafidon, 2021, p. 20). To counter this, aid must prioritize "dignity" as its core principle, where both mitigating stigma and empowering beneficiaries happen in culturally sensitive ways (Thomas et al., 2020).

In both scenarios, a noticeable gap emerged between the funders and the recipients, with philanthropic initiatives rooted in comfort failing to align with the genuine needs of local communities. Instead, the initiatives became entangled within the systemic power dynamics they sought to address.

PROBLEMATIZATION OF COLONIAL PHILANTHROPY-

Decolonization of philanthropy fundamentally acknowledges how colonial systems, mindsets, or dynamics continue to thrive in implicit and explicit ways in aid-based development initiatives (Banerjee & Shriram, 2022). Scholars and development practitioners have concretely discussed the following complexities within the dynamic. The first key question is the positionality of 'development actors' in the development ecosystem. Katie Scott (2021) discusses how the 'White Gaze' constructs practitioners not only as 'experts' but also as 'neutral' actors across contexts. Scott discusses how this perceived neutrality immediately positions the Westerners as 'benevolent humanitarians' who become instrumental in the advancement of the context they operate in, effectively reinforcing the 'white savior' complex.

Furthermore, local Africans not being positioned as 'neutral' actors characterizes them as 'invested' in the context of inviting the 'gaze' and disciplining neutral actors to achieve development goals. Degan Ali (2021) points out how the insider not being able to address the needs of the community is linked to white supremacy because it gives the 'foreigner' an excuse not to check themselves when they are racist and not to explain themselves or be part of the discussion because they are 'neutral.' Secondly, investment in a development initiative does not translate into adequate knowledge about community needs, structures, and wisdom.

A distanced approach leads to underutilization or appreciation of potential partners or ideas that could lead to the success of a program (Gyampo, 2022). Furthermore, the non-involvement of communities and a

dismissal of their voice-choice results in priorities being set by the donors and tend to be 'founder-centric' operating on notions of what they believe to be true v/s acknowledgment of the needs of the community in question (Peace Direct et al., 2023). A lopsided relationship perpetuates a dynamic of 'haves' and 'have nots' in which the donors end up dictating the terms of the relationship, effectively hampering systemic change (Banerjee & Shriram, 2022).

The question of positionality and knowledge hierarchy has paved the way for a critical relook into the design of philanthropic organizations, advisors, practices, and values. The biggest custodians of philanthropic initiatives today are INGOs created to fulfill 'service gaps' while bolstering democratization, good governance, and international development (Peace Direct et al., 2023). The typical modus operandi of INGOs is to receive guidance from other developed/western counterparts while roping in consultants or 'national partners' to model their ambitions on colonial framings. A case in point here is undermining agency and knowledge of 'national' staff who work for international development organizations with lesser payrolls, conformity to 'international standards,' and blatant hierarchy within project contexts (Currion, 2021).

The question of decolonizing aid, therefore, creates a responsibility on both sides of the spectrum. For those on the receiving end of the dynamic, the responsibility lies in producing knowledge, participating in problem diagnosis, and becoming agents in identifying solutions. For donors, it means acknowledging and learning patterns of dominance manifested by taking charge, leading, or making decisions (Peace Direct et al., 2023). However, fundamentally, African development cannot be a reality if Africans are at the margins of the process or if the inherent racism and injustice of global aid systems are left unaddressed or hushed up under the guise of 'development' (Gyampo, 2022). Development can never be decolonized without the process of discomfort and deconstruction that undoes its original assumptions by incorporating indigenous ways of knowing, organizing, and implementing (Sutherland,2023). Encouraging humanitarian actors to reflect on their frames of reference leads to reflecting on the language of 'aid' employed to communicate their engagement and vision. I find here Kertman's (2021) framework to decolonize written communications helpful by –

1. Updating neo-colonial terminologies such as replacing 'beneficiaries' with 'participants.'
2. Centering the participant's agency instead of their pain and suffering, stereotyping them in the process
3. Foregrounding Race as an essential constituent in development work and communication. The 'white privilege' cannot be left implicit but must be made explicit in aid work.
4. Employing equitable, creative, and participatory storytelling methods within the fundraising ecosystem to undo simplistic binary tropes of 'saviour-recipient.'

CREATING ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF OPERATION-

The push towards an intentionality of global funding into Africa is fundamentally rooted in the belief that money must be allocated to communities facing development challenges, and the basis of funding must be principled, participatory, and prospective. In rejection of capitalism and neoliberalist funding, a call for Pan-Africanism is often invoked to unsettle the colonial misgivings of investment (Gyampo, 2022). The idea is fundamentally rooted in the belief that all Africans must collectively be united in their motivation to shape and bargain their development needs across international institutions (Obeng-Odoom, 2018).

The National Institute of Mental Health's Strengthening Mental Health Research and Training Project (SMART)[2] is a prime illustration of impactful international collaboration in tackling children's mental health challenges. This transdisciplinary initiative actively engages diverse stakeholders, from academics and government officials to NGOs and local communities, in a collective pursuit of solutions for children facing "conduct challenges" and helping them achieve behavioral success. Recognizing the crucial role of

local expertise and capacity building, SMART embarked on its mission across Uganda, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa, establishing these nations as early partners in the project. Funded through the generous support of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), SMART achieved early success in delivering effective mental health interventions within resource-constrained settings. Moreover, the project's collaborative spirit extended to the very name of the intervention, initially chosen as "*Amaka Amasanyufu*," – meaning "happy families." This culturally sensitive term not only resonated with the target communities but also held immense promise for widespread scaling and adoption across African contexts, offering vital support to both children and their families struggling with mental health support.

The second important conversation is the recognition of pre-established systems and modes of operation of communities undermined by foreign investment. (Banerjee & Shriram, 2022) Philanthropy cannot do without recognizing its advantages, privileges, and positionality. A crucial part of that dynamic is not pushing piecemeal development but involving communities and individuals closest to the context to create a sustainable solution system (Agler, 2020). Kenya bears witness to a success story in international development – a UK Aid initiative that has tackled the pervasive scourge of drought and its crippling effects on vulnerable communities (Calder wood, 2018). This multifaceted program, aimed to strengthen various pillars of resilience simultaneously: constructing vital water infrastructure to quench thirsty lands, improving access to precious water resources, ensuring food security for beleaguered households, and offering direct financial aid through cash transfers, mitigating the immediate hardships brought on by drought's harsh grip.

As the program nears its culmination in 2024, two significant conclusions emerge. Firstly, the £143 million, ten-year aid package stands on the cusp of a historic transition – it will be entirely handed over to the Kenyan government, marking a monumental shift from dependence to self-reliance[3]. This handover is lauded as a potent symbol of a successful partnership, a harmonious blend of "British innovation with African entrepreneurialism." The growth of the project as a collaborative venture, empowering local communities to manage and mitigate the challenges of climate change effectively, is a commendable achievement. However, amidst the resounding success, a critical question lingers: Can we quantify the impact of this decade-long collaboration? While qualitative assessments paint a promising picture, the lack of concrete data on quantifiable metrics leaves a gap in our understanding of the program's true scope and lasting impact. Incorporating robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms will be crucial to fully grasp the long-term effectiveness of similar initiatives and optimize their potential to foster sustainable resilience in drought-prone regions.

The burden to decolonize does not only lie on the donor organizations; instead, state governments, local NGOs, and individual partners must also look inward to the basis of the funding received, the terms of the partnership, the dependency/sustainability loop it perpetuates to break out of horizontal philanthropy initiatives. Opening up the conversation to decolonization also brings attention to the recipient government's agency, positionality, and motivation. In the organization of aid, therefore, while donors have the power of the purse, recipient governments have the power of consent as sovereign in their territory (Campbell et al., 2023). A case in point is the African Philanthropy Network[2], a continent-wide network of organizations and individuals promoting philanthropic giving. Interestingly, the website puts forth its approach to 'interrogate' and 'intervene' in the power dynamics of giving and investigating who is giving, to whom, and how it is given.

A third proposed solution is philanthropy by Africans for an African future. (Iweala, 2017) The belief in the African diaspora is rooted in the hope of using their 'cultural' intelligence, funding through traditional methods, and empowering fellow Africans to become integral players and not passive recipients of development aid (Iweala, 2017). African civil society must advocate for 'flexible funding' wherein civil society organizations can leverage foreign funding for local impact. A case in point is Amplify Change, a

global funder of strategic change investing singularly in indigenous African organizations (Moyo & Imafidon, 2021). Similarly, Ford Foundation's BUILD initiative has made a $1bn investment in the long-term sustainability of 300 social justice organizations. (Kumi et al., 2021)

IN CONCLUSION- AID BY WHOM AND FOR WHOM?

Anyone who engages with the histories and trajectories of colonialism recognizes that its impact on systems, societies, and individuals has complex manifestations. A call for decolonization must not be characterized as either an alternative way of thinking, metaphorical justice, or merely a new area of research. The solutions remain complex, but the need is clear (Campbell et al., 2023). The fundamentals of aid investment, philanthropic organizations, and development programs must be investigated against critical questions and discomfort this conversation poses. Another impending danger is the simplistic vilification of philanthropists as agents with ulterior motives trying to imperialize development. The call for decolonizing development does not place Western philanthropists and African actors on opposing sides of the debate; instead, it recognizes that with multiple actors shaping development in Africa, the relationship must be empowering, equalizing, and enabling in its realization.

Moreover, finally, the call to decolonize is also heavily embedded in the need for the 'subaltern to speak,'[4] participate, and direct development. Philanthropy, therefore, must move beyond comfortable binaries of have/have-nots, beneficiary/recipient, and expert/indigenous to gauge complex African challenges to succeed at developing contextual and sustainable solutions. I agree significantly with Abugre (2010) that aid works best when the objectives remain narrow and expectations are modest.

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FOOTNOTE

[1] For a detailed analysis of the concept, watch 'Decolonizing Developmental Aid in Africa' by Michael Onyebuchi. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVHafHkSWOA

[2] https://www.nimh.nih.gov/news/media/2022/smart-africa-hub-project-summary

[3] https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/kenya-success-penny-mordaunt-uk-aid-drought/

[4] Discussed by Gayatri Spivak in her seminal piece 'Can the subaltern speak' published in 1994.