

Review of Donors, Democracy and Development in Africa: Western Aid and Political Repression

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This book presents a critical analysis of the role of Western foreign aid in maintaining authoritarian regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on three main case studies: Uganda, Rwanda, and Ethiopia. Through historical, political and empirical approaches, the book shows that instead of promoting democratization, Western development aid often reinforces repressive power structures by ignoring human rights abuses and political manipulation by ruling elites. Written by Mark Simpson, the book argues that aid flows from Western countries to authoritarian regimes in Africa have significantly contributed to the preservation and consolidation of repressive rule in these countries. Such aid, while rhetorically linked to the promotion of democracy and development, often reinforces the power of the ruling elite and undermines the political and civil rights of citizens. In this regard, donors often fail to recognize that they are not only passive spectators, but also active players who reinforce political power with financial and symbolic support.

Simpson has a professional background at the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) and the Carter Center, organizations active in election monitoring and democracy promotion. These engagements have given him a deep understanding of the good intentions of international donors, but also of the failures of their implementation, especially in promoting genuine democratization. He is also the co-author of the book [The Primacy of Regime Survival SIMPSON & HAWKINS 2018], which discusses the destruction of states due to a ruler's primary focus on staying in power, a theme very close to the content of this book. Simpson's background is not only relevant, but also represents a combination of practical experience and academic reflection that makes him highly competent to critique the relationship between Western aid and authoritarian regimes in Africa. This makes the book's main arguments feel authentic, informed, and empirically and theoretically sound.

Simpson generally takes a critical position and challenges dominant understandings in the development and foreign aid literature, especially in terms of the relationship between Western aid and democratization in Africa. Much of the Western donor literature and policy assumes that foreign aid, particularly good

governance and democracy aid, promotes political reform, democratization and human rights in developing countries. Simpson challenges this assumption, pointing out that aid often reinforces authoritarian regimes, as donors focus more on stability, security cooperation and technocratic development indicators. According to Simpson, authoritarian regimes are clever at playing the donor game, pretending to support democracy while maintaining repressive control. As such, this book challenges the optimistic mainstream understanding of the role of foreign aid in promoting democracy.

While Simpson's work is analytically and empirically strong, there are some notable gaps and limitations, both in terms of methodology and generalization. First, Simpson is very strong in criticizing the role of donors, but lacks in offering concrete solutions or policy reform pathways. As a result, readers may feel pessimistic, as it is not explicitly shown how donors can do right. Second, almost the entire analysis is focused on actors such as the US, UK, EU, World Bank and UN. As such, new geopolitical influences, such as China's authoritarian-developmental model or the BRICS alliance, are less explored. This limits understanding of the complexity of the contemporary international aid landscape. Third, Simpson takes a position that is highly critical of Western donors and with good reason. However, his approach can be read as overemphasizing donor failures, and underplaying the internal dynamics of recipient countries (for example, the role of local elites in maintaining power).

The book contains a variety of concrete case examples that strongly support its central argument that Western aid has strengthened authoritarian regimes in Africa, rather than promoting democratization. Simpson uses three main case studies: Uganda, Ethiopia and Rwanda, and each presents very strong historical, political and empirical evidence. In Uganda, Yoweri Museveni has been in power since 1986, modifying the constitution and systematically suppressing the opposition. Despite this, Uganda continues to receive substantial aid from the US and UK, particularly for security and health (SIMPSON 2024). One evidence of this is that the US military aid program, including troop training and equipment for the Somalia mission (AMISOM), continues despite increasing human rights violations. In Rwanda, the Paul Kagame regime is hailed by the West as a model of development, but it is extremely repressive. It also exercises complete control over the media, opposition and civil society. Heavy support from the UK and EU continued, even as human rights abuses came to light. Rwanda was also the site of the UK's illegal immigrant deportation program (the Rwanda Migration Deal) (SIMPSON 2024), demonstrating political cooperation despite its poor human rights reputation. While in Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed was hailed as a reformer and even received the Nobel Peace Prize, but then led a brutal war in Tigray (2020-2022) (SIMPSON 2024). The war saw thousands of civilians killed, mass starvation, and sexual violence as a weapon of war. Instead of being denied aid as a result of this case, most aid continued and was not stopped, only temporarily reduced. These three case studies directly illustrate the dissonance between donor democracy rhetoric and the practice of supporting repressive powers. The evidence Simpson presents reinforces the argument that foreign aid often maintains, rather than opposes, authoritarian regimes in Africa.

The main criticism of this book lies in the author's tendency to frame donor-recipient relationships in relatively rigid binary terms, describing Western donors as reinforcing authoritarianism and aid recipients as strategic manipulators. This tends to neglect the variety of cases in which aid can promote democratic reform or strengthen accountable institutions. This approach is effective in sharpening political criticism, but it risks overlooking the complexity of more diverse interactions, including successful local initiatives that leverage aid to expand civic space. Furthermore, the exclusive focus on Western donors reduces the opportunity to analyze the multipolar dynamics that are increasingly shaping the aid landscape, particularly the role of China and other non-Western actors who also shape political incentives in Africa. As a result, while the book excels in exposing the hypocrisy and hidden interests behind democratic rhetoric, it tends to offer little in the way of a constructive roadmap for future aid policy reform.

Simpson's book has high strategic and applicative value for various groups at both theoretical and practical levels. For activists, it provides powerful advocacy material on the contradictions between foreign aid and regime repression, and it provides data and narratives to dismantle the development success narrative that masks human rights violations. For researchers and academics, this book can serve as a methodological model for empirical political analysis. Furthermore, Simpson presents important reflections on project design, especially on: Pseudo-participation, Formal decentralization and Donor dependency. Finally, the book is recommended for anyone who wants to develop bilateral aid policies that consider human rights indicators, not just economic stability or growth.

Declaration

*The author declares no conflict of interest or ethical issues for this work.

Relevant Literature

1. SIMPSON, Mark. (2024). [Donors, Democracy and Development in Africa: Western Aid and Political], 2024. London: Palgrave Macmillan: London.
2. _____ & HAWKINS, Tony. [The Primacy of Regime Survival: State Fragility and Economic Destruction in Zimbabwe], 2018. Palgrave Macmillan: London.