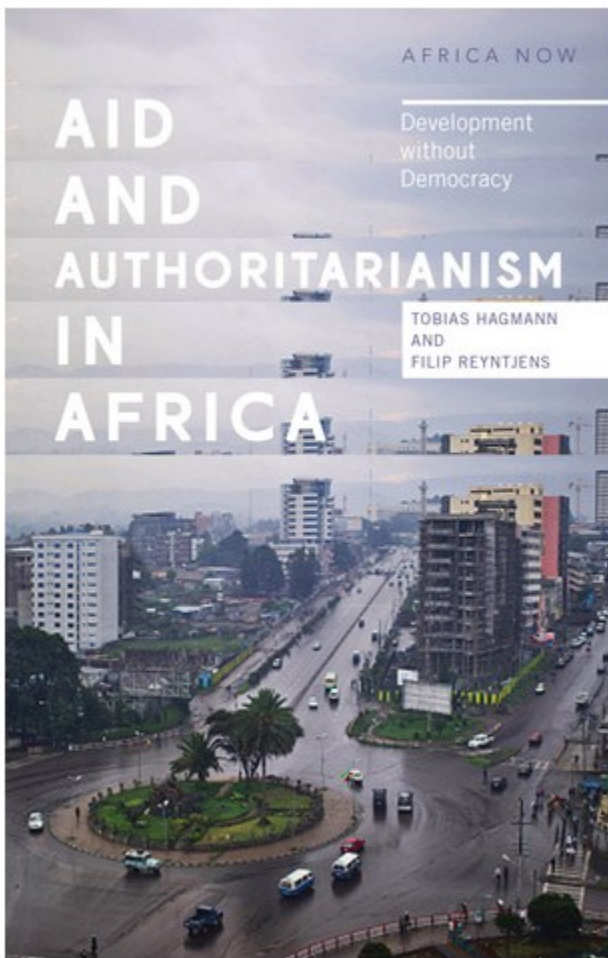


# The hypocrisy of the Western aid regime

By Tobias Hagmann and Filip Reyntjens 20 September 2019



*Aid and authoritarianism in Africa. Development without democracy, Hagmann and Reyntjens*

*As part of our popular Book Club series, Tobias Hagmann and Filip Reyntjens discuss the key lessons from their powerful publication [Aid and Authoritarianism: Development without Democracy](#), which explains why Western governments that supposedly promote human rights have been so keen to support authoritarian leaders around the world.*

Our new book explores a contradiction. While Western donors claim to promote democracy, human rights and liberal values, they often support authoritarian and illiberal regimes in Africa. Particularly in the past decade-and-a-half, important donors have traded their earlier commitment to political reform for the achievement of increasingly technocratic development outputs. As a result many donors are complicit in fostering development without democracy in Africa. The recent revival of this complicity between foreign aid and authoritarianism in the name of “development” went largely unnoticed by both academics and the broader public, and perhaps even by aid agencies themselves. This book thus attempts to draw attention to some of the illiberal effects of aid channelled to authoritarian political regimes in sub-Saharan Africa.

A significant body of scholarly work exists on why and how donors disburse aid. This literature explains both foreign aid’s positive and negative impacts on economic growth, poverty, development and domestic governance. However, much of this literature suffers from one of two shortcomings: it either conceives of aid in technocratic, managerial and ultimately apolitical terms, or it seeks to explain the relationship between foreign aid – typically framed as the independent variable – and democracy/democratization or the lack thereof – often presented as the dependent variable. The hypothesis that foreign aid can strengthen autocracies has rarely been considered after the end of the Cold War.

## Donors and dictatorships

The collusion between donors and dictatorships raises several questions. Why do donors not only support, but also align their policy agendas with authoritarian rulers who reject the very democratic values that Western donors endorse, at least officially? What is the significance of what Nicolas van de Walle in the book’s concluding chapter accurately describes as “African democracy fatigue” for past, current and future development policies? Why have prominent donor agencies revised their earlier stances on democratisation in favour of more narrow “developmental” objectives that are easily quantifiable, but come [without political freedom](#)? Donors’ rhetoric about a supposed trade-off between political rights and economic development is shared neither by taxpayers living in donor countries nor by “recipients” in Africa. Rather the decision to fund authoritarian regimes is in large part the outcome of an elite bargain between donor and recipient governments.

Two main themes are at the centre of our book. We first look at donors’ motives for giving substantial amounts of aid to undemocratic recipient regimes (the “why” question). Second, we examine the political and economic consequences that these aid flows generate (the “what” question). On the first question and drawing on the existing literature, the book highlights the multiple factors explaining donor calculations with regards to aid allocation: national security interests, ideological proximity, the maintenance of aid budgets, and a host of other domestic and geopolitical considerations. Yet donor motives cannot be seen in

isolation from recipient governments' behaviour and assets. [Lindsay Whitfield](#) has argued that a recipient government's ability to project non-negotiability and the confidence that its actions will not lead to donors pulling out distinguishes more or less successful recipient countries. Ethiopia and Rwanda are good examples for this. Both are one-party states and "donor darlings" who managed to convince donors that governance was "technocratic" and "developmental" and thus unrelated to politics and rights. Both their governments silenced their internal and external critics, and both obtained more aid as they became more dictatorial over time.

On the second question, that of foreign aid's impact on domestic governance, the existing literature is inconclusive with some studies suggesting a positive relationship between aid and democracy, others showing disparate impacts, and others still finding none, or [a negative relationship](#). Dutta *et al.*, in what they call the "amplification effect", argue that aid neither improves nor deteriorates political governance, but that it essentially amplifies recipients' existing political-institutional orientations: "[Aid makes dictatorships more dictatorial and democracies more democratic](#)".

### **Giving up on democracy**

The chapters in this book scrutinize donor motives for supporting authoritarian regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa and the various, often negative, impacts created by foreign aid. Five of the seven chapters consist of country case studies that offer in-depth analyses of donor motives and development dynamics in authoritarian Rwanda, Uganda, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Angola and Mozambique. Two additional chapters discuss how shifting conceptions of democracy square with the acceptance of authoritarian practices and take stock of donors' current "fatigue" with promoting democracy on the African continent.

Taken together, *Aid and authoritarianism in Africa* highlights how donors gradually abandoned their earlier commitment to democratic governance in recipient countries over the last decade-and-a-half in favour of a, once again and like in the heydays of the modernisation theory, more technocratic approach to development that sits well with the authoritarian policies of a number of sub-Saharan African regimes.

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