

Democracy matters more than ever:

Democracy assistance after the entrance of the “Emerging Southern Powers” in Sub-Saharan Africa



Over the last ten years the new “Emerging Southern Powers” – China, India, Brazil and South Africa – have increased their economic and political engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa. They have introduced new ideas and development models, and their presence and actions challenge various aspect of development aid - in particular what is labeled ‘democracy assistance.’ Democracy assistance is also increasingly criticized by recipient governments who now believe they have an alternative source of funding, as well as by people within the traditional donor community who favour a “development first” approach. Proponents of the “development first” strategy hold that demands for democracy is a form of western conditionality and that what is important is to stimulate economic growth and investments. Defenders of democracy assistance maintain that development presupposes transparency, democratic institutions, social inclusion, as well as economic growth. Though it is not without its problems, this brief argues that in the current context of executive dominance and major limitations on political opposition and civil society - as well as growing inequalities - democracy assistance is crucial. As Kenyan intellectual John Githongo so succinctly put it in a recent opinion in *The New York Times*: “An authoritarian country cannot grow itself out of its fundamental underlying political contradictions. Eventually, a democratic deficit sets in.”

Democracy assistance revisited: Why does it matter?

Democracy assistance (aid and assistance provided by donors to promote democracy and democratic governance in recipient countries) is a relatively small part of international aid efforts. At the turn of the millennium approximately two billion USD of the official ODA was used

for democracy assistance, and this has not increased significantly since. This indicates that democracy assistance is not the most prioritized area of development assistance. Nevertheless, up until 2007 there seemed to be a consensus within the donor community that “considerations of national sovereignty should not shelter a country’s internal political

arrangements from outside observation or criticism" (See CMI Brief International Democracy Assistance: Key Lessons). However, during the past few years, this view has increasingly come under siege. The emergence of new economically powerful actors has both provided African countries with new development models and potential allies, and strengthened voices within the traditional donor community that argues for a "development first" approach.

The emergence and importance of the "Southern Powers": China, India, Brazil and South Africa

The past twenty years has seen a multitude of new actors ascend the power pyramid and make their presence felt on the international scene. The end of the Cold War and the bipolar world system opened up possibilities for many other power-brokers to wield their influence. Oil-rich Arab countries, Turkey and South Korea, as well as the non-DAC members of the European Union, have increased their focus on Africa - particularly in the 2000s. Whether positioning themselves as donors, business partners, or simply as friends, these actors influence the future direction of politics in Sub-Saharan Africa. The most important new actors in this regard, are the often called "Emerging South Powers": China, India, Brazil and South Africa. These actors have played a role in African politics since the 1950s, but the new factors are the increasing economic importance of these countries and the way in which this has shaped their relationship with African countries.

China's economic growth has perhaps been the most important factor. Chinese investment in Africa has increased dramatically over the past 10 years, and China is now Africa's biggest trading partner (together with the US). The initial impetus behind China's engagement in Africa was to secure raw materials for Chinese industries. Through the growth and international expansion of the Chinese economy and industries, investments in big construction projects followed. Chinese involvement remains linked to China's immediate needs at home: agricultural products, Chinese migration and outlets for Chinese commodities. At the same time, China has increased their bilateral aid efforts and also subsidized the China Export-Import (Exim) Bank to provide for loans and credit to African governments on conditional terms. By 2011, the Chinese aid volume is expected to be similar to that of Norwegian government-to-government aid to Africa. At the same time, India and Brazil have similarly increased their economic presence in Africa. Indian trade with the continent has expanded from USD three billion in 2000, to nearly USD 40 billion in 2011, while Brazil's trade passed the USD 20 billion mark in 2010. Both countries also have a well-defined development assistance program focused on capacity building and technical assistance. South Africa, while not as economically powerful as

the other three countries, is a major political and economic player in many parts of Africa, intimately linked to its own economic interests, particularly within the banking and financial sector. All countries are heavily involved in infrastructure-projects, and play an important part in the infrastructure-boom that has emerged over the last five years in Africa. All in all, it is difficult to find an African economy where at least one of the "Emerging Southern Powers" is not important.

The common pattern that emerges for these 'new donors' is that their foreign policies revolve around promoting their national interests and economic prospects, irrespective of the nature of the regime they are dealing with. All four countries - and in particular China - stress the importance of non-interference. India and Brazil have increasingly advocated for the importance of democratic reforms, as highlighted by the Declarations from the recent Africa-India Summits in 2008 and 2011. South Africa has frequently been cited as a key player in relation to Africa's evolving policies on governance and democracy. However, it seems like the South African support for democracy is primarily rhetorical (i.e. involvement in Zimbabwe).

In a sense, we have moved on from the unipolar world of the 1990s, where Western aid was the 'only game in town'. This has important consequences for Western aid in general, and particularly for democracy assistance. The emergence of the "Emerging Southern Powers" have created opportunities for South-South cooperation, and decreased Africa's dependence on Western donors, investors and trading partners. The rise in donor options thus seems to have increased the bargaining power of African countries. While it is unlikely that the economic power of the "Emerging Southern Powers" can replace or even compete with the West in terms of aid in the close future, this is not necessarily important. What is important is that African governments and leaders think or claim to think that they have alternative partners. This strengthens their hand in negotiations with Western donors, and makes it less likely that they will accept political demands they feel encroach on their national sovereignty.

This is not the only consequence, however. While the above-mentioned non-interference policy is a principle that the emerging donors strive to adhere to, they are nevertheless indirectly exporting a different development model. What Deborah Brautigam calls the "East Asia model", a model where a developed country with a larger economy provides infrastructure loans in return for natural resources, is increasingly viewed as a model that can be "exported" to Africa. Interestingly enough, the model is based on China's own experience: China offered oil to Japan in exchange for infrastructure-assistance in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The fact that the

Emerging Southern Powers, and particularly China, sees their involvement in Africa as mutually beneficial because they get essential raw materials in return for their investment strengthens this model. The economic growth in countries such as Ethiopia, Uganda and Rwanda is frequently cited as “African” stories similar to China. These are being put forward as examples of how non-democratic regimes have managed to create economic growth. While Brazil and South Africa have shown a willingness to cooperate with traditional donors, China and India have (with some notable exceptions) been reluctant to do so. This contributes to the image of India and China as offering “something different” than the traditional donors. In a sense the old “development first” paradigm has reemerged.

Traditional Donors: The reemergence of the “development first” paradigm

In the past few years an increasing number of agents within the traditional aid community have advocated that the West needs to focus on issues similar to those of “the Emerging Southern Powers”: According to this paradigm, economic development is more fundamental than democracy, partly because economic development will lead to internal pressure for democracy as the country develops. Moreover, democracy assistance may hinder the growth of a democratic culture, because it may slow down economic growth and development. In a recent article in *Journal of Democracy*, the head of the Governance and Anti-Corruption Secretariat at the World Bank Group, Brian Levy, argues that the developmental state is the way to go. In an article in the same volume, Thomas Carothers claims that others within the donor community share Levy’s opinion. In fact, there seems to be a genuine fear within some segments of the traditional donor community, that promoting democracy and democracy assistance might actually have damaging political and economic consequences in the future (See Box 1). China is seen as a shining example of the “development first” approach (conveniently “forgetting” the fact that it is still an authoritarian country), and the entrance of the “Emerging Southern Powers” is seen to create opportunities for increased focus on development rather than democracy. However, in a final article in the same volume, the president of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) Kenneth Wollack argues convincingly against this, by pointing out that socioeconomic development requires a political system that creates incentive structures that enable inclusive government. In other words; socioeconomic development requires democracy in order to be effective.

Democracy assistance is more important than ever

The economic growth that we have witnessed in many African countries in the last decade, and the entrance of new international actors with a focus on non-interference and economic prosperity, are not arguments for cutting democracy assistance. It is precisely

the opposite: recent developments make it imperative to focus on democracy issues and democracy assistance, because the democratic voices internally in many African countries are increasingly being suppressed in the name of development. In some African countries today, the opposition is not allowed to carry out their mandate, especially between elections. The recent crackdown on democratic and policy-oriented demonstrations organized by the opposition and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Uganda, Malawi, Ethiopia and Senegal are good examples. As highlighted by Carothers (see Box 1), it is these very countries that are being promoted as the good examples by the proponents of the “development first” approach. Assistance to the opposition in these countries is essential for these countries’ democratic prospects - especially in “hybrid regimes”; countries that have adopted some of the wrappings of democracy, but still harbor authoritarian elements such as a dominant party structure that regularly controls and wins elections because of an uneven political playing field.

Many of these regimes receive large amounts of budget support from the international community as well as support for infrastructure projects from the “Emerging Southern Powers.” With the well-documented use of patronage-politics by incumbent parties and leaders in many hybrid regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa (See CMI-Brief When Elections Consolidate Power for an example from Uganda), budget support and infrastructure projects can at least indirectly be seen to assist the incumbent regimes, and help them stay in power. Therefore, now is the time to make sure that development assistance benefits both those outside and inside government. Democracy assistance in Sub-Saharan Africa should therefore be increased rather than decreased, and the focus should be broadened to face the new challenges confronting the region. Many of the answers to the challenges have been highlighted before, but the new challenges make it imperative to highlight them again.

Go local and expand the focus

One of the answers is that the approach should be local. The one-size-fits-all-approach currently employed by many donors mean that they often try to create “Western” political systems, and do not recognize the importance of the individual country-specific factors and traits. This emphasis on a predefined system rather than a context-specific system also reduces the focus on policy. This particularly goes for implementation of policy, which must be seen in light of the structures of a country’s institutions, to avoid the same weaknesses reappearing under a succession of different nominal policies.

Democracy assistance needs to embrace a wider range of institutions. Until now, democracy assistance in Africa has primarily supported electoral processes, civil society and political empowerment of women. However, as many recent elections in Sub-Saharan Africa have

Box 1: The “development first” paradigm in academic debate

Countries that follow the path of state-led development are typically run by dominant leaders or parties... Insofar as they are successful, developmental states lead to both an increasingly sophisticated economy and a wealthier, more empowered citizenry – with resultant rising pressure for institutions that can undergird enhanced political competition.” (Levy 2011: 31)

“If anything, concerns in development circles about the harmful effects of attempted democratization in fragile states have been rising in this decade. And the visible developmental successes of various nondemocratic regimes, such as China, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tunisia, Uganda, and Vietnam, are frequently invoked by developmentalists as evidence against the advisability of a democracy focus. The argument advanced by Amartya Sen a decade ago for reconceptualizing development to incorporate democracy as an intrinsic value has gained little hold in the development community.” (Carothers 2010: 24)

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highlighted, an election cannot be equated with democracy. In Ethiopia, President Meles Zenawi and the ruling EPDF won the last election by 91% of the vote, virtually uncontested. Contested elections are not necessarily free or fair either, as highlighted by recent electoral contests in Zimbabwe (2008) and Uganda (2011). The focus on elections is the chosen form of democracy assistance for most development partners because it focuses on an event or a democratic activity. However, such a focus fails to pay attention to the pre- and post-election periods, or the day-to-day politics, when much of the policy and political practices are formed. Thus, the preoccupation with elections at the expense of other elements of the democratization process often defeats the whole purpose of the democratization project.

We should not stop focusing on elections, but rather expand the focus to include new and different types of institutions and events as well. Constitutional, legal and administrative reform is an increasingly important topic, with the new constitution in Kenya proving a case in point. Countries that have successfully introduced comprehensive constitutional reforms such as Ghana and South Africa have become some of the success stories of the continent. This type of work should be encouraged. Furthermore, more focus should be given to building responsible and disciplined political parties with sound and coherent policy platforms. Most opposition parties in Africa are young, often loosely organized and facing a severely entrenched incumbent party that often abuses state resources. Therefore, strengthening the opposition parties is imperative to ensure a level playing field. Other areas that could be relevant are the decentralization of politics, anti-corruption measures, security-sector reform,

and support of regional and sub-regional integration. This highlights that a local, broadly based approach to democracy assistance is imperative to create a balanced and vibrant society with stakeholders both inside and outside the government offices.

Do not forget the governance of the political kingdom

Democracy assistance should become more politically aware, more country specific, and more diverse. It should expand in the face of new challenges, rather than retract as some of the supporters of the “development first” approach seems to suggest. The entrance of the “Emerging Southern Powers” makes it more important than ever for more donors to engage in democracy assistance. And while many African countries have experienced economic growth over the past five years, this growth has been unevenly distributed and there is a general lack of political capability to do anything about this. A country can experience economic growth and provide many social essentials such as education, health care, infrastructure, and sanitation whilst simultaneously experiencing increased inequalities, lack of basic rights, and an unresponsive leadership unable to address the concerns of its citizens. Too often growth takes place in countries where the capacity to create jobs in the formal sector is inadequate. Elitist regimes manipulate ethnic, religious and regional differences to maintain power, and turn the attention away from systemic inequalities that may serve as incitements to violence and disorder. Thus, now more than ever, it is important to focus on democracy assistance, so that we do not experience a democratic backslide in the name of economic growth in Sub-Saharan Africa.

This brief is primarily based on papers and discussions presented at a conference on “Legitimacy of Power - Possibilities of Opposition” held in Kampala, Uganda from the 30th of May 2011 until the 1st of June 2011. The conference is part of the ongoing CMI-UiO project “Elections and Democracy in Africa”.

Further reading

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